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FLANN O'BRIEN'S AT SWIM-TWO-BIRDS AND THE TRIAL OF REPRESENTATION

BY

CHARLES R. DAVIDSON

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Charles R. Davidson

24 Armshore Drive
(Student's permanent address)

Halifax, N.S. B3N 1M5

Date: 10 April 1989

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Flann O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds and the Trial of Representation

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Shirley F Neuman.
(Supervisor)

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ABSTRACT

Flann O'Brien has been pigeon-holed as a minor comic talent, or, occasionally, a lesser Joyce, largely because the scope and exuberance of his work eludes conventional literary approaches. At Swim-Two-Birds provides a unique examination and inversion of literary conventions; the text presents a novelist whose characters revolt and seize control of the story in an attempt to write it to their own ends. Such a radical inversion of authority has a more than merely comic effect: it calls into question the conventions of authority and representation which govern the acts of reading and interpreting.

This thesis utilizes contemporary literary theory in order to interrogate O'Brien's engagement with speech and literary genres. A persistant criticism of At Swim-Two-Birds is its alleged failure to distinguish between "reality" and "fiction." Current theoretical writings provide a useful context within which a strong argument can be made that the novel does not confuse literature and life, but explores in a complex fashion exactly that confusion.

The first chapter reads elements of At Swim-Two-Birds in conjunction with the literary theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose concept of dialogism suggests a useful approach to a carnivalesque text whose words are always, at the very least, doubled. The second chapter considers the text's absorption from, and reflection upon, Irish literary traditions as self-exposing intertextual practices, and the third chapter examines the implications of the systematic conflation of the roles of readers, authors, and critics. The final chapter is concerned with the trial that ends the novel and the questions of representation that the trial leaves hanging.

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INTRODUCTION

At Swim-Two-Birds: the Critics Vs. the Text

There are many good reasons for critics either to completely ignore or to seek to contain At Swim-Two-Birds. To begin with, the novel and its author, Flann O'Brien, appear to view the project of literary exegesis with scorn.[1] Perhaps more importantly, At Swim-Two-Birds pre-empts criticism and leaves critics with little of their traditional role of learned exegesis.[2] At Swim-Two-Birds itself contains a variety of depictions of literary critics, most of which are unflattering. One character offers the opinion that,

> whether a yarn is tall or small I like to hear it well told. I like to meet a man that can take in hand to tell a story and not make a balls of it while he's at it. I like to know where I am, do you know. Everything has a beginning and an end. (63)

The smugness with which Anthony Lamont expresses himself ironically highlights his total ignorance of and unwillingness to consider the Middle Irish epic that is the object of his criticism. However, his comments have an obvious application to the novel within which they are offered. As far as beginnings and ends go, At Swim-Two-Birds has either three of each, or more, or less (depending on how one counts), but it certainly does not have the Aristotelian trinity of beginning, middle and end; more importantly, critics with reading tastes similar to Lamont's will discover that within the world(s) created by the text

of At Swim-Two-Birds, they will not and cannot know where they are. And they have criticized Flann O'Brien for their uncertainties.[3]

If critics in the world of At Swim-Two-Birds continually encounter unflattering depictions of themselves, they also confront a wide variety of textual practices that usurp the functions usually left by literary texts to critical texts. Thus, within a few pages of the novel's inception, in an apparently realistic description of the student narrator's room, the following sentences occur:

> The washstand had a ledge upon which I had arranged a number of books. Each of them was generally recognized as indispensable to all who aspire to an appreciation of the nature of contemporary literature and my small collection contained works ranging from those of Mr. Joyce to the widely read books of Mr. A. Huxley, the eminent English writer. (11)

The following sentence links by contiguity the works of Mr. Joyce and Mr. A. Huxley with "certain porcelain articles related more to utility than ornament." In addition to the irreverent connection that is drawn between the aspiring literateur's library and the implied chamber pot, the passage identifies literary influence and thus performs the work often left to critics. Here the narrator has announced his debts and contexts; critics are left to follow up the references and discover specific connections, both of which are easy enough to do, except for the slight unease that results from the critics' having had their task pointed out to them by the author that they are explicating.

More obviously intrusive are the frequent interruptions which inform readers (and critics) of the Name of the figure of speech, Symbolism of the foregoing, or the source of an allusion or quotation

(20, 195). Once again, the effect of these interruptions is to introduce the traditionally extraneous function of the critic into the text. One of the earliest critics to make this point is Denis Johnston, who wrote that At Swim-Two-Birds "incorporates in the text a number of explanatory comments on itself that would usually be found in footnotes" (301). There is a great deal at stake in At Swim-Two-Birds' phagocytotic absorption of the language of criticism. Linda Hutcheon comments generally that art forms "have increasingly appeared to distrust external criticism to the extent that they have sought to incorporate critical commentary within their own structures in a kind of self-legitimizing short-circuit of the normal critical dialogue" (A Theory of Parody 1). This suggestion is helpful, and of O'Brien's distrust of the critical dialogue there can be no question, but Hutcheon's acceptance of that dialogue as normal remains problematic to the extent that her work remains self-consciously theoretical and offers in itself a theoretical key for interpreting aesthetic texts while claiming that her work is "a plea for theory that is a response to aesthetic realities" (116).[4]

Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer provide an account of how the critical dialogue has often operated:

> Literary criticism often presents itself as the humble servant of the work on which it comments, uncovering the text's meanings and structures and rewriting them in a more easily apprehensible form for the benefit of readers less intelligent, or less industrious, or less sensitive to literary techniques (or the subtleties of human experience) than the critic. Such servitude may, however, be a barely disguised form of mastery, functioning to elide, mask, or divert attention away from whatever in the text tends to move beyond the control of the reader, who operates necessarily within a horizon of inherited expectations and conventions. (3)

Although these two critics are writing about the Joycean critical industry, the argument holds true for criticism of Flann O'Brien. Indeed, it is particularly true insofar as the major part of critical essays on At Swim-Two-Birds have tended to be taken up with plot summaries. There are practical reasons for this. From the date of its original publication in 1939 to its first reprint in 1960, there were a limited number of copies of At Swim-Two-Birds in existence.[5] Even after the book was reprinted, presumably for the benefit of new readers, critics still felt the need to include an attempt at summarizing the work. However, although the tendency to summarize was most likely a result of the doubtful canonicity of At Swim-Two-Birds, nevertheless its effect was to severely limit the possibility of critical essays doing more than superficially describing a small portion of the plot.[6] The result is reductive in the extreme and, further, acquires a certain ironic tinge given that, throughout the novel, the student narrator makes inadequate attempts to summarize his unwieldy manuscript and even substitutes a summary for some missing pages of manuscript (60, 150, 164).

A further unfortunate tendency of early critical attempts to come to terms with the world of At Swim-Two-Birds was the recurrent struggle to describe O'Brien as similar to a host of other authors, most frequently the two mentioned in the novel, Joyce and Huxley. These critical approaches generated a reduced and diminished version of At Swim-Two-Birds and then proceeded to comment on it. Attridge and Ferrer suggest that critics' pretensions of servitude and their elision of their own role serve to maintain the boundaries between the text and readers or critics. Their argument clarifies both why At

Swim-Two-Birds incorporates critical discourse and why critical discourse has tended to reject At Swim-Two-Birds:

> Each claims to have a secure position outside the object they are judging--critic outside the literary text, reader outside the critical text--and not to be in any way implicated in producing, or being produced by, the text they read. And both feel the satisfaction of "discovering" truths in a text which coincide with those they have brought to it. The literary work which refuses this satisfaction, which does not yield to the prevailing critical strategies, whose proliferations go uncontrollably beyond established reading habits and threaten to obliterate the safe distance between text and reader, is put to one side, to await the critic who will be able to show that it is, after all, not so ferocious, but has merely been misunderstood. (3)

My purpose is not to recoup and contain At Swim-Two-Birds, but to explore what it achieves by refusing the satisfaction associated with what Lamont described as "knowing where you are." At Swim-Two-Birds remains a resisting text, but by placing the novel in different contexts, some of the implications of that resistance emerge. Italo Calvino suggests the "hypothetical bookshelf" as a metaphor for the constant contextual and intertextual evaluation and re-evaluation that results from the introduction of another book into the world of books: "Once it is there [on the hypothetical bookshelf], in some way or another, it alters the shelf, expelling certain other volumes from their place or forcing them back into the second row, while demanding that certain others be brought up to the front" (The Uses of Literature 81). This thesis will explore the alteration that At Swim-Two-Birds undergoes when placed on a hypothetical bookshelf and read in the context of some contemporary theoretical writings.

At Swim-Two-Birds draws upon and reproduces texts from a large and diverse number of sources and has, in turn, influenced or

anticipated the fictional practices of many contemporary writers. However, At Swim-Two-Birds, in addition to embodying particular and distinctive fictional practices, can also be read as a theoretical exploration of discursive practices, including those of fiction. The text questions the distances between readers, critics and texts, and it also explores the distinctions between different writing practices. Attridge and Ferrer suggest above a number of the issues that are at stake in the generic distinction between fiction and criticism. It is, therefore, not surprising that a text which is attempting to call into question those issues will necessarily be both critical and fictional.[7] This is not an entirely new concept: Friedrich Schlegel made the intriguing suggestion that "A theory of the novel would have to be itself a novel."[8] And Ruth ApRoberts argues of At Swim-Two-Birds that "it takes a novel to explain the novel" (76). Because of the theoretical nature of At Swim-Two-Birds, an appropriate context for the work must be made up, in large part, by works of contemporary literary theory.

The first chapter reads elements of At Swim-Two-Birds within the context of the literary theories of Mikhail Bakhtin whose concept of dialogism suggests a useful approach to a carnivalesque text whose words are always, at the very least, doubled. The second chapter considers the text's absorption of, and reflection upon, Irish literary traditions as self-exposing intertextual practices, and the third chapter examines the implications of the systematic conflation of the roles of reader and author. The final chapter will review the conclusions reached in the body of the thesis, and will also consider

At Swim-Two-Birds in terms of the trial that ends the novel and the questions of representation that the trial leaves hanging.

There is an obvious irony in attempting to criticize a writer who was so devastatingly hostile to much criticism. Perhaps Flann O'Brien would greet this work in same way that his brother, Micheal O Nuallain, suggests O'Brien would have the 1986 "Flann O'Brien International Symposium" held in Dublin. O Nuallain "declared that Myles would have been merciless in taking the whole thing apart but would have been secretly delighted with such belated recognition and such dedicated pursuit of the spirit of fun."[9]

NOTES: INTRODUCTION

[1]Flann O'Brien is the pseudonym under which Brian O'Nolan published At Swim-Two-Birds. O'Nolan also wrote under a bewildering and probably unascertainable number of other names, the most famous of which is Myles na Gopaleen under which he published the column "Cruiskeen Lawn" in the Irish Times. I will be referring to the author as Flann O'Brien because that was the name that he adopted for this and his other novels.

[2]A number of recent critics suggest that the incorporation of a critical apparatus is characteristic of the meta-fictional, avant-gardist, post-structural or anti-novelistic novel. See, for example, Linda Hutcheon, Brian McHale, and Peter BÜrger.

[3]One of the recurring themes in criticism of At Swim-Two-Birds is O'Brien's ostensible inability to separate literary or stylistic worlds from the "real world." Robert Alter describes the novel: "fiction is everywhere and there is no longer any quixotic tension between what is fictional and what is real" (224). Alter and critics who make this accusation apparently accept as unproblematical the notion that "reality" can be incorporated into fiction.

[4]For evidence of O'Brien's distrust and outright scorn for the normal critical dialogue, one need only consult his policing of, and periodic attacks on, the Joyce critical establishment. See David Powell, "An Annotated Bibliography of Myles Na Gopaleen's (Flann O'Brien's) 'Cruiskeen Lawn' Commentaries on James Joyce."

[5]Readership was unquestionably limited. Anne Clissman notes that At Swim-Two-Birds originally appeared on 13 March 1939, and that "[s]ix months later only 244 copies had been sold" (78). Peter Costello and Peter van de Kamp point out that "[e]ventually Longmans' warehouse was bombed and most of the edition lost" (63).

[6]Niall Sheridan made what is undoubtedly the wittiest response to an attempt to describe the plot of At Swim-Two-Birds: "'That's not a plot,' I told him [O'Brien]. 'It's a conspiracy'" (44). Sheridan's comment is particularly interesting since the character Brinsley is based in part on Sheridan, and, as Sheridan observes, O'Brien "recreates the mood and atmosphere of our discussions with astonishing fidelity" (45). In other words, it would appear that we have Sheridan's literary judgment preserved in the book, both in the words of the character Brinsley and in the considerable editing of At Swim-Two-Birds done by Sheridan before its publication, and outside the work in a biocritical essay on the author.

[7]Flann O'Brien questioned the distinction between criticism and fiction from both sides, so that not only does his fiction have an obviously critical dimension, but his major essays in criticism contain fictional elements. See, for example, "A Bash in the Tunnel."

[8]Qtd. in John Vignaux Smyth (13).

[9]Qtd. in Seamus Hosey (2).

CHAPTER ONE

When Genres Collide: Worlds of Style in At Swim-Two-Birds

At Swim-Two-Birds cannot be accused of being a conventional novel. Readers are often driven to describe it as an anti-novel, that is, to describe it in terms of what it is not, rather than what it is, since it is much easier to determine the rules the text breaks than the rules it follows.[1] At Swim-Two-Birds transgresses certain novelistic norms, parodies others, and juxtaposes a variety of conventions in an incongruous fashion. The novel unexpectedly yokes together recognizable genres such as legends of Ireland's heroic past, the pulp western, and the bildungsroman of a Dedalesque Dublin university student. Flann O'Brien clearly achieves comic results with this strange mélange of styles and stories, but there is an underlying seriousness.[2] At Swim-Two-Birds turns out to be, as its narrator suggests a novel should be, a reference work to the novel, and not only to the specific novels from which characters are borrowed, but also to the rules and conventions of the novel as a genre. As ApRoberts suggests, At Swim-Two-Birds "is itself an exploratory definition of genre" (77).

This chapter explores O'Brien's interrogation of genre conventions and the resulting implications for theory of the novel. I will draw upon the theoretical work of Mikhail Bakhtin in order to bring into focus some of the concerns which the theorist and the novelist share. Bakhtin uses terms such as "dialogism,"

"heteroglossia," and "carnival" to describe the general ability of the novel to comprehend a wide variety of speech and literary genres. Because Bakhtin is articulating a theory of the novel, we should be able to apply these terms and ideas to virtually any novel. Bakhtin's own treatment of novels of the nineteenth-century Russian realist masters, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, demonstrates that those novels are not as seamless as they have appeared and that they are dialogic, rather than monologic. O'Brien's novel already foregrounds the extent to which it is multi-voiced and uses every possible device to bring this aspect of the novel to the attention of readers. In this way, O'Brien manages to create a novel that embodies novelistic conventions, parodies those same conventions, and finally offers in itself a theory of the novel. However, before approaching At Swim-Two-Birds in specifically Bakhtinian terms, I will suggest the issues that the novel raises by first considering the novel's multiple openings. This consideration will be informed by Bakhtin, but his will remain a sub-text until the second part of the chapter, at which point I will utilize his terms to restate and comment upon questions raised by O'Brien's text.

A concern with theory is evident from the first pages of At Swim-Two-Birds onward. The opening introduces readers to both the anonymous narrator and his unusual theories concerning the beginnings of novels:

> Having placed in my mouth sufficient bread for three minutes' chewing, I withdrew my powers of sensual perception and retired into the privacy of my mind, my eyes and face assuming a vacant and preoccupied expression. I reflected on the subject of my spare-time literary activities. One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may

> have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings. (9)

This opening is at once the beginning of the novel and the introduction of an anti-Aristotelian poetics. The effect of introducing the ostensible author in this fashion is curious: we establish the character of the narrator from his literary theories. From the beginning of At Swim-Two-Birds, the narrator and his narrative appear to be side-effects of his literary theories. What follows are, predictably enough, "Examples of three separate openings," and the three examples are noteworthy for the lack of any apparent connection or relation between them. The openings illustrate the narrator's attitude towards novels, but they also serve another, more complex function in that they draw readers' attention to the conventional expectation that an opening gesture will point to a recognizable genre or traditional literary practice. Since At Swim-Two-Birds provides several openings, several different directions are suggested.

The first of the three openings seems recognizable enough: a fairy story or folk legend of Ireland recounted in a style possibly reminiscent of James Stephens' whimsical and unusual diction. The second opening contains almost nothing that would be familiar to any reader, either in this or any other context, and the third is very clearly a modern re-telling of an ancient story in a fashion that attempts to retain in English some of the features of the original Old Irish. The first and third openings are alike in that they promise to treat an Irish subject; stylistically, however, they are very different and seem likely to prove incompatible.

The initial opening describes the Pooka MacPhellimey, "a member of the devil class":

> He was seated at his diptych or ancient two-leaved hinged writing-table with inner sides waxed. His rough long-nailed fingers toyed with a snuff-box of perfect rotundity and through a gap in his teeth he whistled a civil cavatina. He was a courtly man and received honour by reason of the generous treatment he gave his wife, one of the Corrigans of Carlow. (9)

The language of this description draws attention to itself through the use of obscure English words that require explanation (for example, "diptych"), and also through the conscious archaism involved in describing an individual as "courtly" or utilizing the locution "received honour by reason of." Thus, although the subject of this passage is the folkloric Pooka and is very clearly Irish, the archaism and allusion recall an English prose style, rather than an Irish one.

By contrast, the third opening dealing with Finn Mac Cool employs conventions that are clearly derived from the Gaelic sagas and also from the various nineteenth and early twentieth-century attempts to translate them, as a small excerpt from the description of the legendary hero illustrates:

> Three fifties of fosterlings could engage with handball against the wideness of his backside, which was large enough to halt the march of men through a mountain-pass. (9)

Note the use of "[t]hree fifties" rather than "one hundred and fifty," and "wideness" rather than "width," as well as the metaphor for hugeness drawn from an age when people marched through mountain passes. Again, certain archaisms are utilized (for example, "fosterlings"), but the effect is one that both recalls the

translations of the Irish sagas and parodies of those efforts such as Joyce's in the "Cyclops" episode of Ulysses.

However, intervening between these two recognizable examples of Irish writings is the much less typical second opening:

> There was nothing unusual in the appearance of Mr. John Furriskey but actually he had one distinction that is rarely encountered--he was born at the age of twenty-five and entered the world with a memory but without a personal experience to account for it. His teeth were well-formed but stained by tobacco, with two molars filled and a cavity threatened in the left canine. His knowledge of physics was moderate and extended to Boyle's law and the Parallelogram of Forces. (9)

This second opening does not embody a readily apparent literary convention, except, possibly, a parody of realist methods of building character. The initial impossibility of a newly born twenty-five year old complete with memory, but lacking the experience to account for that memory, is plainly ludicrous, and the seemingly arbitrary list of attributes that follows this disclosure is equally at variance with the literary conventions familiar to most readers. The information that Furriskey is threatened by a cavity in the left canine or that he is familiar with "Boyle's Law and the Parallelogram of Forces" is meaningless; no context is provided in which this information can make sense. Perhaps this opening might be read as "modern," in so far as it appears paradoxical and intentionally obscure.

However, at some point, either further into the novel, or upon rereading, it will become clear that Furriskey, in being born with a memory but not the experience to account for his memory, comes into existence in exactly the same fashion as any character in any book. Characters are, to some extent, the offspring of authors'

imaginations, and often emerge into the world of fiction at advanced ages. Furriskey differs from other characters inasmuch as this peculiar form of immaculate conception is commented upon at length within the novel.

The first and third openings, if they appeared on their own, would offer a fairly clear indication of how they ought to be read, which is to say, what readers might reasonably expect of the book. The second opening does not: it remains a cipher about which little can be discovered until more of a context is given. However, these openings do not appear in isolation: they appear in the context of each other as well as of the indecipherable second opening, and all three appear within the larger frame of the narrator's "opening" which introduces the three. That "fourth" opening, which, appropriately enough, appears first, introduces the nameless Dublin student and also reflects on the issue of novel construction. Once again, a beginning that introduces a narrator and contains that individual's reflections on her or his art is not unusual, but, in At Swim-Two-Birds the openings have been multiplied to an extent that makes it impossible for readers to simply select one opening as the "real" opening. In other words, the paradoxes that are apparent in the passage concerning Furriskey contaminate the two surrounding openings, and also spill over into the initial opening. Readers might ask how reflections which occupy the space of "three minutes chewing" appear in the text before us (9). As they do appear there, does this mean that this book is the "good book" that the narrator is imagining or, as this particular book has four openings (or possibly one: can a book ever really have more than one opening?), is this some other book? The

three openings that are presented as italicized "openings" do seem "entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author," except that they are presented in the context of each other and accompanied by an opening that introduces the author, and thus some connection between the three openings is made (9). However, if three openings can be brought, flaunting their artifice, before our attention, then surely we should be suspicious of that initial opening as well.

Each of the four openings suggests certain conventions or genres. If a single opening were presented then readers would soon settle into a particular set of expectations conditioned by exposure to comparable writing practices. One would not expect a game of poker to appear within a story which is told in the manner suggested by the third opening, nor would one anticipate finding cowboys within a novel set in twentieth-century Dublin. Yet both of these conjunctions occur in At Swim-Two-Birds. O'Brien's perverse and erratic shifts in genre refuse readers the pleasure of following the predictable patterns set up by genre expectations. Thus the notion that a prolonged discussion of how to begin a novel could be itself the beginning of a novel only begins to prepare readers for the paradoxical self-reflexivity of the text.

The initial conglomeration of distinct styles exploits the comic potential of the incongruity that results from the juxtaposition of genres usually kept segregated, but it also implies that a wide variety of styles are always available and that the function of authors is to choose among styles.[3] The nameless narrator is characterized by a distanced and ironic diction, particularly in his

"biographical reminiscences," but within his manuscript he refuses to be confined to a single style. Anne Clissman counts "some thirty-six different styles and forty-two extracts" in At Swim-Two-Birds (Flann O'Brien 86). The clashes, gaps and incongruities that result are deliberately sought by the narrator who advances a theoretical defense of his literary practice.[4]

The account of the literary conversation with Brinsley, in which the narrator tenders "an explanation spontaneous and unsolicited concerning my own work, affording an insight as to its aesthetic, its daemon, its argument, its sorrow and its joy, its darkness, its sun-twinkle clearness," is unquestionably the most frequently quoted passage of At Swim-Two-Birds:

> Nature of explanation offered: It was stated that while the novel and the play were both pleasing intellectual exercises, the novel was inferior to the play inasmuch as it lacked the outward accidents of illusion, frequently inducing the reader to be outwitted in a shabby fashion and caused to experience a real concern for the fortunes of illusory characters. The play was consumed in wholesome fashion by large masses in places of public resort; the novel was self-administered in private. The novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic. In reply to an inquiry, it was explained that a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity. It was undemocratic to compel characters to be uniformly good or bad or poor or rich. Each should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living. This would make for self-respect, contentment and better service. It would be incorrect to say that it would lead to chaos. Characters should be interchangeable as between one book and another. The entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating only when they failed to find a suitable existing puppet. The modern novel should be largely a work of reference. Most authors spend their time saying what has been said before--usually said much better. A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and

> would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimbleriggers and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature. Conclusion of explanation. (25)[5]

And Brinsley's rejoinder should not be left out: "That is all my bum" (25).

This passage raises a number of concerns, but I will begin by considering two of the central ideas to which O'Brien himself returned over the years, namely the notions that characters are sufficiently independent to merit "a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living," and the idea that they are interchangeable. In another context, O'Brien points out that although Sherlock Holmes stories are copyrighted, Sherlock Holmes, the character, is not, and accordingly makes the following helpful suggestion:

> Your detective story-writer of today usually confronts his investigator with problems many times more fiendishly intricate than the worst which faced Holmes, but these writers are mere tradesmen, quite incapable of bringing to birth a great character like Holmes: their crimes are solved by fellows who are filled with sawdust, who never took a dart of cocaine in their lives. Why not turn their work over to Holmes?
>
> * * *
>
> This idea simply means that a skilled cook should buy trusted ingredients from a grocer before attempting to make a cake--unless, of course, the cook is so versatile as to make the ingredients as well as bake them. Few are. No considerations of copyright or punctilio, of course, prevents anybody from producing a few more volumes concerning Gargantua and Pantagruel, but those gentlemen's characters are imbedded in their doing inextricably, whereas Holmes is complete and detached, even if he had never gone out into the fog of Baker Street. (Hair of the Dogma 156-57)

The idea that characters can be extracted from the books in which they are embedded and employed elsewhere is a logical, if absurd extension of the widely held notion that a literary character possesses an

integrity and a psychology which are somehow independent of the author.[6] If characters exist in their own right then surely they can be borrowed and used elsewhere. Likewise, if they are autonomous complex creatures, they have all the rights and needs of other human beings; hence the call for improved standards of living and working conditions.

Furthermore, implicit in the idea of textually independent, interchangeable characters, and explicit in the elaboration of that idea by the student narrator, is the idea of the novel as a "work of reference." If authors can import characters from pre-existing texts, it is necessary to understand how this appropriation works. A literary personage is characterized by a number of signs including a name, and certain trademarks in speech, dress, or manner. A number of trademarks instantly identify Holmes so that even people who have never read any stories about the famous detective will recognize the signature tweed cap and cape.[7] In borrowing a character, an author reproduces the features associated with that character.

Just as the narrator of At Swim-Two-Birds incorporates existing characters into the novel, he also includes other material that comes to hand, ranging from a letter from a racing tout, the "Excerpt from Literary Reader, the Higher Class, by the Irish Christian Brothers," the "Extract from 'A Conspectus of the Arts and Natural Sciences,' being a further description of Trellis's person," and from numerous other sources (12, 21, 30). These borrowings and splicings have a comic effect, but they also serve to draw attention to one of the most fundamental patterns of language use, which V. N. Volosinov describes as the repetition and "refraction of 'another's speech'" (xvi).

O'Brien was acutely conscious of the ways in which language use appears as the repetition of learned patterns of speech. When a given pattern is completely fossilized, it appears as a cliché, and in "The Myles na Gopaleen Catechism of Cliché," O'Brien subjected cliché, or, as he put it, "all that is nauseating in contemporary writing" to a ruthless analysis:

> Is man ever hurt in a motor smash?
> No. He sustains an injury.
> Does such a man ever die from his injuries?
> No. He succumbs to them.
> Correct. But supposing an ambulance is sent for. He is put into the ambulance and rushed to hospital. Is he dead when he gets there, assuming he is not alive?
> No, he is not dead. Life is found to be extinct.
> Correct again. A final question. Did he go into the hospital, or enter it, or be brought to it?
> He did not. He was admitted to it.
> Good. That will do for today. (Best of Myles 202)

The "Catechism of Cliché" considers the ways in which language users must negotiate language which is already spoken. In other words, speakers encounter a language which is largely made up of predetermined phrases and thoughts. Language users confront conventions of language in the same way that novelists and novel readers confront the previously established conventions of the novel. The "Catechism of Cliché" utilizes the form of the catechism, which associates the rigid and fixed quality of some language patterns with the preset and absolute answers of the catechism, and which also, because of the question and answer format, isolates and emphasizes particular words and thereby makes strange otherwise commonplace locutions. O'Brien's approach to novelistic conventions is much the same.

In At Swim-Two-Birds, the aspiring novelist confronts a dilemma comparable to that facing speakers. Just as language users, for the most part, speak language that is pre-formed, often to the extent of being cliché, similarly most novelists will end up writing the novelistic equivalent of cliché, and will reproduce (with minor variations) familiar characters, plots that proceed along predictable lines, and a style which will be immediately recognizable as generically conventional. What makes O'Brien's writing strategy intriguing is that just as the superabundance of cliché in his discussion of cliché paradoxically manages to avoid being a boring repetition of the familiar, At Swim-Two-Birds manages to be original by being frankly and extravagantly derivative.

Having already touched on some of the crucial concepts in Bakhtin's theory of the novel, I would now like to introduce his terms. Some areas of overlap are immediately obvious, and it is important to emphasize that Bakhtin is useful in this context, not because his theories apply to all novels and hence also to At Swim-Two-Birds, but because O'Brien's fictional exploration of language use is complemented by Bakhtin's theoretical examination.

Both writers are concerned with the constraints language imposes and the liberties that it provides. O'Brien is particularly concerned with situations wherein an individual becomes trapped in an alien language use.[8] Within O'Brien's work, this entrapment can occur in a number of different ways; a few examples are the anonymous speaker in the "Cruiskeen Lawn" who is always full of the doings and sayings of "the Brother," the speaking voice of "The Plain People of Ireland," which is repetitious to an agonizing degree (but extremely funny),

and, to draw one of many examples from At Swim-Two-Birds, the magnificent misquotation provided by the uncle near the end of the novel: "There are more things in life and death than you ever dreamt of, Horatio" (214). What all of these examples have in common is the situation of speakers who never really appear to get beyond the words of others.

Bakhtin elaborates a general theoretical framework which provides a helpful context for understanding O'Brien's local fictional interrogation. Thus where O'Brien presents his readers with specific speakers who remain trapped in the authority of others' discourses, Bakhtin formulates similar concerns as a general point in considering the relation of language users to language:

> Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated--overpopulated--with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. ("Discourse in the Novel" 294)

One might add that in virtually all of O'Brien's writings, he most often examines the not entirely successful attempts of speakers to appropriate the language of others. The uncle's use of Shakespeare is again a good example.

Bakhtin suggests that all language, including the single word, is always overladen with the intentions of others. However, not only do words carry the intentions of others, often they are quite literally the words of others. In addition, language users most frequently discuss, whether directly or indirectly, the language use of other language users:

> At every step one meets a "quotation" or a "reference" to something that a particular person said, a reference to "people say" or "everyone says," to the words of the person one is talking with, or to one's own previous words, to a newspaper, and official decree, a document, a book and so forth. ("Discourse" 338)[9]

The student narrator's theory (and At Swim-Two-Birds' praxis) of the modern novel as a work of reference is thus a literalization of Bakhtin's theories of language. According to Bakhtin, where speakers of a language will encounter the words of others which will primarily include speakers (although the words of texts are generally also present), readers will encounter words made familiar by other texts as well as by speakers. At Swim-Two-Birds emphasizes the extent to which language is derivative by duly noting the numerous quotations. Readers of At Swim-Two-Birds also encounter the language practices of a number of speakers (most notably the uncle) who do not seem to find a voice outside of (mis)quotation, allusion and repetition.

Bakhtin argues that just as words come to speakers already charged with the meanings of others, so too do discursive practices or "speech genres." An individual's voice evolves within and through a welter of competing voices. Nevertheless, individual language users can find their own voices, but only through engagement with the language practices of others within the available cultural discourses:

> The importance of struggling with another's discourse, its influence in the history of an individual's coming to ideological consciousness, is enormous. One's own discourse and one's own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other's discourse. This process is made more complex by the fact that a variety of alien voices enter into the struggle for influence within an individual's consciousness (just as they struggle with one another in surrounding social reality). ("Discourse" 348)

Many of O'Brien's speakers are clearly unable to free themselves from the authority of others' discourses and to find an individual voice which would allow them to do more than repeat clichés, which, in Bakhtinian terms, are the fossilized words of others: the anonymous catechist embodies this condition. However, O'Brien constantly returns to the question of an individual's relation to the discursive practices of a larger community. In novel writing, this is specifically a question of genre conventions and characters' speech patterns. The anonymous narrator of At Swim-Two-Birds is, on the one hand, clearly able to negotiate, or at least reproduce, a wide variety of types of speech, ranging from the uncle's repetitive and derivative Dublinese to poetry that mimics the ancient Irish style; however, the narrator, too, is characterized by a certain style which, if more complex than his uncle's, is no less derivative. It then appears that the student, both as a character and as a narrator, is typified by repetitive and derivative language practices which indicate that his language is suspect and is as much a jargon as any of the other characters' within the novel.[10] Just as the beginning of At Swim-Two-Birds refuses to present readers with a "real" beginning that has authority to interpret the other "beginnings," the novel further refuses readers a language that has the authority to interpret either the events of the novel, or the other languages within the book. The voice of the narrator merely appears as another language among languages.

Bakhtin suggests that such is the condition of all novels, that "even the very language of the writer (the poet or novelist) can be taken as a professional jargon on a par with professional jargons"

("Discourse" 289). However, At Swim-Two-Birds differs from more conventional novels in so far as the levelling of authority in language within the novel that Bakhtin describes occurs in it as one of the novel's central themes and main strategies rather than as an inevitable side effect of novelistic practice. Since the author Trellis can be put on trial by his characters, and the authority of his language can be completely undercut by another writer, the authority of the nameless student narrator may also rest on equally flimsy ground. Furthermore, the author's mysterious and Godlike power to create becomes, within At Swim-Two-Birds, the subject of mockery through an extended reductio ad absurdum regarding the new science of "aestho-autogamy" (55). After the author loses authority to interpret and mediate the speech and events recorded, readers are left to interpret for themselves, and to try to evaluate among a Babel of languages.

In this way, At Swim-Two-Birds with its proliferation of "non-authorial" or "extra-authorial" styles and its corresponding devaluation and de-centering of the authoritative voice, embodies one of Bakhtin's central concepts regarding the novel. Bakhtin writes:

> The novelist does not acknowledge any unitary, singular, naively (or conditionally) indisputable or sacrosanct language. Language is present to the novelist only as something stratified and heteroglot. Therefore, even when heteroglossia remains outside the novel, when the novelist comes forward with his own unitary and fully affirming language (without any distancing, refraction or qualifications) he knows that such language is not self-evident and is not in itself incontestable, that it is uttered in a heteroglot environment, that such a language must be championed, purified, defended, motivated. In a novel even such unitary and direct language is polemical and apologetic, that is, it interrelates dialogically with heteroglossia. It is precisely this that defines the utterly distinctive orientation of discourse in the novel-

> -an orientation that is contested, contestable and contesting--for this discourse cannot forget or ignore, either through naiveté or by design, the heteroglossia that surrounds it. ("Discourse" 332)

Of course, the language of the narrator of At Swim-Two-Birds is anything but "unitary and fully affirming" and it contains every imaginable distancing, refraction and qualification, all of which intensifies the condition that Bakhtin describes. "Heteroglossia" is an attempt to translate a word of Bakhtin's own coinage, whose meaning, perhaps, becomes most clear in his own use of that term:

> The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized. The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour (each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphases)--this internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre. The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types [raznorecie] and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia [raznorecie] can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized). These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization--this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel. ("Discourse" 262-63)

It is important to note that just as there are speech genres, there are also literary genres, and O'Brien is concerned with both. In the world of At Swim-Two-Birds, in fact, the two constantly meet, and so "Red" Shanahan, a character out of a pulp western, speaks a cross between Dublinese and a hack writer's conception of western dialect; Finn Mac Cool, who speaks at great length and often in "poetry," is dubbed "Sir Storybook" (109). The point is that just as a character in a genre has a fixed speech pattern which is set by that genre, so too, a person in "real life" will also have a limited speech pattern which may be a social dialect or may correspond to a literary genre. In any case, the separation between literature and life is blurred: each is always infecting the other.

Although O'Brien tends to treat the mutual interference of literature and life, literary genre and lived practice humorously, it is clear that he is nonetheless very serious; it is also a theme he returns to again and again in all his various guises. This concern with the persistence of generic expectations appears in a concentrated form in the following excerpt from his newspaper writings:

> When I reached home I was in an odd mood. I felt . . . old. Age and achievement hath like brandy a mellowness yet withal a certain languor. My daughter was in the next room humming and putting on her hat. I called her.
>
> "Hullo, Bella. Sit down for a moment, will you."
>
> "Yes, Daddy. What's the matter?"
>
> A long watery stare out of the window. The pipe is produced and fiddled with.
>
> "Bella. . . how old are you?"
>
> "Nineteen, daddy. Why?"
>
> "Bella, we've known each other for a long time. Nineteen years. I remember you when you were very small. You were a good child."
>
> "Yes, daddy."
>
> More embarrassment.
>
> "Bella. . . I have been a good daddy to you, haven't I?

> At least I have tried to be."
>
> "You are the best daddy in the world. What <u>are</u> you trying to tell me?"
>
> "Bella. . . I want to say something to you. I'm. . . I'm going to give you a surprise. Bella. . . please don't think ill of me but. . . but. . . but, Bella--"
>
> With a choking noise she has jumped up and has her arms about me.
>
> "O daddy, I know, I know! I know what you are going to say! You. . . you're not my daddy at all. You found me one day. . . when I was very small. . . when I was a tiny baby. . . and you took me home. . . and cared for me. . . and watched over me. . . and now you find you have been in love with me all these years. . . "
>
> With a scream I was on my feet. Soon I was racing down to street to the local cinema, clutching in my inside pocket the old-fashioned Mauser, a present from Hamar Greenwood for doing a few jobs for him at a time when it was neither profitable nor popular. I reached the cinema and demanded to see the manager. Soon the suave pink-jowled ruffian appeared and invited me into his private office. Very shortly afterwards two shots rang out and I sincerely hope I will be given the opportunity of explaining to the jury that I had merely wished to suggest to my daughter that as a father of a family who had worked and scraped for years to keep other people in luxury, it was about time I should be relieved of the humiliation of having to press my own trousers. (<u>Best of Myles</u> 349-350)

In this passage, we can see O'Brien exploring the same issues that occupy him in <u>At Swim-Two-Birds</u>. It is particularly noteworthy that the reader is in a similar position to the daughter, and, given the style that O'Brien adopts at the beginning of the passage, is doubtless expecting a revelation of the magnitude that the daughter anticipates. That the style conditions an expectation similar to the daughter's is something of which the writer is perfectly aware, and it is on that conditioned response, and its almost total irrelevance to the life of the average human being, that the humour of this passage turns. The speaker of this passage, like many of O'Brien's other protagonists, is in the position of censuring an offense of which he is equally guilty. No one as finely tuned to cliché as O'Brien could

possibly be using "two shots rang out," innocently and O'Brien himself has drawn attention to the banal phrase, "at a time when it was neither profitable nor popular" in a number of his other writings.[11] The locution "two shots rang out" is literary (or sub-literary); the "neither profitable nor popular" is both Dublinese and a staple of the sort of journalism that O'Brien mocked. Father and daughter are, thus, both guilty of the same crime, and it is one in which the reader is also implicated. It is these interrelations of literary convention, reading habits, and speaking and writing styles, or, in other words, the problem of interpreting the world, that O'Brien explores at greater length in At Swim-Two-Birds.

Aside from the obvious point that the novel, by virtue of being longer, allows more space for such explorations, Bakhtin suggests why the novel is a particularly appropriate form in which O'Brien could interrogate the degree to which genre conditions reader expectations:

> The novel permits the incorporation of various genres, both artistic (inserted short stories, lyrical songs, poems, dramatic scenes, etc.) and extra-artistic (everyday, rhetorical, scholarly, religious genres and others). In principle, any genre could be included in the construction of the novel, and in fact it is difficult to find any genres that have not at some point been incorporated into a novel by someone. Such incorporated genres usually preserve within the novel their own structural integrity and independence, as well as their own linguistic and stylistic peculiarities.
>
> There exists in addition a special group of genres that play an especially significant role in structuring novels, sometimes by themselves even directly determining the structure of a novel as a whole--thus creating novel-types named after such genres. Examples of such genres would be the confession, the diary, travel notes, biography, the personal letter and several others. All these genres may not only enter the novel as one of its essential structural components, but may also determine the form of the novel as a whole (the novel-confession, the novel-diary, the novel-in-letters, etc.). Each of these genres possesses its own verbal and semantic forms

> for assimilating various aspects of reality. The novel, indeed, utilizes these genres precisely because of their capacity, as well-worked-out forms, to assimilate reality in words. ("Discourse" 320-321)

Bakhtin's insight goes some distance towards explaining the inclusion of various writing practices within At Swim-Two-Birds. The text explores the ways in which genres assimilate reality, create reality, and the ways in which language users, both readers and fictional characters, are themselves assimilated by the language that they consume or use.[12]

At Swim-Two-Birds explores genre issues by multiplying and re-duplicating the genres that confront readers. A further important element in the strategy that makes At Swim-Two-Birds an interrogation of genre conventions, rather than just a repetition of those conventions, is that just as none of the openings are privileged to interpret the other openings, and none of the speech genres are authorized, so too, none of the styles have authority over the others. O'Brien achieves this levelling of authority partially through the novel's proliferation of styles. However, O'Brien's strategy goes beyond simply bringing different modes of writing into contact with each other: in At Swim-Two-Birds the styles throw off authority and hierarchy; they commingle promiscuously. They both describe and enact what Bakhtin terms the carnivalesque. The novel is carnivalesque from the beginning(s) onwards, so no isolated segment is the site of carnival in At Swim-Two-Birds. For practical reasons, I will focus here on the journey that is taken by the Good Fairy and the Pooka to the birth place of Orlick Trellis.

The Good Fairy proposes this venture, and does so out of a motive familiar from numerous folk tales, in which a good and an evil spirit contend for influence over a newborn child. Of course, a number of factors make it difficult to assimilate this episode of At Swim-Two-Birds to the safe and simple realm of folklore. To begin with, the newborn is already an adult; furthermore, the conversation between the Good Fairy and the Pooka swings between the exceedingly banal and the erudite; and, finally, the two characters gather a whole host of followers from an impossible variety of different contexts including mad Sweeny, the ancient Irish King and poet, two cowboys out of pulp westerns, and Jem Casey, "the bard of Booterstown" (119).

The journey begins when the Good Fairy calls on the Pooka to invite him to the birth of Orlick Trellis and to propose a contest for influence over the life of Orlick. Both the contest and the emblematic names of the Good Fairy and the Pooka announce the folkloric source of this archetypal tale. However, right from the beginning a number of notes are sounded which indicate the distance between this episode and the more traditional tale. To begin with, the multi-clause colloquy in which the two engage swings dizzily from the extremely banal to the mock erudite. Readers are faced with twin discussions of numerology and the possibility that the Pooka's wife is a kangaroo. The two discussions are carried out simultaneously but are rigorously segregated. Their numerological considerations lead the Pooka to raise the question of whether evil or good will ultimately triumph. He asks the Good Fairy,

> Has it never flitted across your mind that the riddle of the last number devolves on the ultimate appearance of a pooka or good spirit who will be so feeble a force for

> good or bad (as the case may be), that he will provoke no reagent and thus become himself the last and ultimate number -- all bringing us to the curious and humiliating conclusion that the character of the Last Numeral devolves directly on the existence of a party whose chief characteristics must be anaemia, ineptitude, incapacity, inertia and a spineless dereliction of duty? Answer me that!

To which the Good Fairy responds:

> As a matter of fact, said the Good Fairy, I do not understand two words of what you are talking about. Do you know how many subordinate clauses you used in that last oration of yours, Sir? (110)

The Good Fairy is able to inform the Pooka of the exact number (15), which leaves readers in the curious position of believing that the Good Fairy cannot understand the Pooka's utterance, but can count the clauses. The tone of the conversation is decidedly odd due to the striking contrast between the Good Fairy's irascibility and the Pooka's urbanity. An allusion to the "fugal and contrapuntal character of Bach's work" applies equally to the conversation (110). The style of conversation sets the scene for following conversations, in which topics which appear mutually irrelevant are simultaneously discussed.

The discussions get more complicated and juggle more issues when the two supernatural entities are joined by the two cowboys and the two poets. The whole journey becomes increasingly carnivalesque in a variety of ways. To begin with, there is a commingling of characters drawn from usually separate genres. Poets, cowboys, and supernatural figures drawn from folklore are brought together: a Middle Irish poet King, borrowed from texts that command the reverence of the Celtic Revivalists or the Gaelic Leaguers, encounters Jem Casey, the people's

poet, and even some of the people. As is made clear in this episode, particularly by the Good Fairy, the divisions that keep these characters apart are social fictions very much associated with class.

Just as in the carnival atmosphere the different social orders can interact outside of the social order that structures normal interactions, in this episode the different styles and concerns of the different characters can be brought together in a fashion that does not reproduce the hierarchies that normally apply to different modes of writing. In other words, the Pooka and the Good Fairy belong in children's stories, Sweeny's poetry is the real old stuff of the native land, to be reverenced by all but read by very few, and Slug and Shorty have been borrowed from lowbrow pulp westerns for the masses.

Graham Greene, one of the earliest readers of At Swim-Two-Birds, notes this aspect of the novel: "its amazing spirits do not disguise the seriousness of the attempt to present, simultaneously as it were, all the literary traditions of Ireland" (41). Such a presentation (or representation) will only be possible in an unusual space, such as that described by Jem Casey upon his being told that the Pooka is carrying a fairy in his pocket:

> I believe you, said the poet, I believe all that I hear in this place. I thought I heard a maggot talking to me a while ago from under a stone. Good morning, Sir or something he said. This is a very queer place certainly. (119)

Part of the queerness of the place is accessible to readers as a textualizing of familiar conventions. If we consider once more the conversation between the Pooka and the Good Fairy, we should notice

that it is not too hard to accept that the Good Fairy is invisible. There are precedents for such a suggestion, but how do we read an exchange like this:

> This party that you talk so much about, [the Pooka] enquired, where does it live?
> Over there, said the Good Fairy with a jerk of his thumb, beyant.
> If I could only see your thumb the time you jerked it, said the Pooka, I might know what you are talking about. (112)

The words on the page are able to attribute an action to the Good Fairy impossible for a character who has been characterized as non-corporeal. The Pooka's repetition of thumb and jerk seems to suggest that he has access to the printed page, which represents a level of knowledge denied to characters by virtually all writing practices. The assertion that the Pooka could know that the Good Fairy jerked his thumb without seeing that invisible thumb sets up a paradoxical situation in which readers are asked to envision something and then to imagine its opposite. The moment is one in which the textual surface intrudes. The carnival that takes place, then, involves not only the characters or contexts but also the participation of the material dimension of the text in the comic inversions and general upheaval of expectations.

The Good Fairy participates in another comic inversion insofar as that entity is representative of a certain order both as an announced agent of good, and in the very traditional tastes expressed by the Good Fairy regarding both poetry and society. As an emissary of order and the status quo, particularly the order represented by the uncle (whom the Good Fairy occasionally appears to echo, particularly

in its attitudes to drink), it is entirely in the spirit of the carnivalesque that the Good Fairy should be defeated by the Pooka, and it is doubly appropriate that this should be achieved through a card trick. What remains is the baleful influence of the Pooka's instruction in non serviam to little Orlick. The repetition of Lucifer's rebellious declaration recalls Stephen Dedalus. This evocation carries the interesting suggestion that O'Brien may be relocating the rebellion inscribed by Joyce from the realm of the individualistic and solitary to the realm of the social and carnivalesque.

In At Swim-Two-Birds, O'Brien gives his readers the opportunity to see the different speech and literary genres as no more than styles in competition with each other, in an environment in which none of the language practices is ranked or privileged. Readers negotiate this heteroglossia, and in doing so must recognize their own ability to choose among languages and the implications of such choices. Although O'Brien does not seem to find the condition of heteroglossia as positive as Bakhtin does, nevertheless, O'Brien does demonstrate the plurality of language and the polylinguality of the novel. In so doing, he creates a fictional world in which different speech and literary genres interact dialogically with one another. O'Brien is closer to Bakhtin than the novelists the latter discusses insofar as At Swim-Two-Birds constantly draws attention both to its own dialogism, and also to the implicit dialogism of all literature. Thus, the narrator's practice of excerpting widely results in the inclusion in At Swim-Two-Birds of texts, such as the "Literary Reader, the Higher Class, by the Irish Christian Brothers," which attempt to

be didactic and monologic. At Swim-Two-Birds places these texts in a new context, infecting them with new and previously unimaginable significance. O'Brien's literary practice thus represents a parallel to Bakhtin's theoretical project; but where Bakhtin describes dialogism in the novel, O'Brien in At Swim-Two-Birds enacts that dialogism and thereby demonstrates its force in all fiction, and, ultimately, in all language use.

NOTES: CHAPTER ONE

[1]Anne Clissman is one of many who read At Swim-Two-Birds as an "anti-novel" (89).

[2]Ironies abound in the triangle comprised O'Brien, Joyce and literary critics. One of the most striking is that O'Brien's comment on a tendency among certain critics of Joyce's work to be so caught up with its seriousness that they ignore the obvious humour inverts to the equally valid point that critics of O'Brien's work have been so caught up with its humour that they have ignored its seriousness ("A Bash in the Tunnel" 208).

[3]Franco Moretti, in Signs Taken for Wonders, makes a comparable point about Ulysses, which he suggests is "a mad clearance-sale of literary styles; and it is no accident that Joyce does not found a school, and that those who use him as a model and imitate one of Ulysses's many styles betray the fundamental intention of his novel: the systematic refusal to assume one style as the privileged vehicle of expression" (206).

[4]It should also be added that given the narrator's proclivities toward sloth, other explanations of his practice are readily available, and the presentation of his theory is clearly open to an ironic reading.

[5]The only marked section in Joyce's copy of At Swim-Two-Birds occurs in this passage. It is, unsurprisingly, the declaration "that a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity" (John Garvin, 61).

It is also entirely appropriate that this passage which sets out modern writing as an extended project of borrowing should itself be borrowed. Thus in Anthony Burgess' novel Earthly Powers one of the characters remarks: "'A novelist friend of mine', Diana Cartwright said, 'affirmed that a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity.'" (520; qtd. in Rudiger Imhof, Alive, Alive O! 30).

B. S. Johnson begins his first novel:

> Seated comfortably in a wood and wickerwork chair of eighteenth-century Chinese manufacture, I began seriously to meditate upon the form of my allegedly full-time literary sublimations. . . one style for one novel was a convention that I resented most strongly. . . I concluded that it was not only permissible to expose the mechanism of a novel, but by doing so I should come nearer to reality and truth . . I should be determined not to lead my reader into believing that he was doing anything but reading a novel." (Travelling People 11-12; qtd. in

Randall Stevenson, The British Novel Since the Thirties 201. Ellipsis in Stevenson).

[6]Clissman quotes the following statement by E. M. Forster, which she suggests provides "the basis of the idea for At Swim: [Forster] says: "The characters arrive when evoked but full of the spirit of mutiny. For they have these numerous parallels with people like ourselves, they try to live their own lives and are consequently often engaged in treason against the main scheme of the book. They "run away", they "get out of hand"; they are creations inside a creation, and often inharmonious towards it; if they are given complete freedom they kick the book to pieces, and if they are kept too sternly in check, they revenge themselves by dying, and destroy it by intestinal decay'" (Aspects of the Novel 74; qtd. in Clissman 91).

[7]Alma Elizabeth Murch makes a similar claim that "certain characters [such as Sherlock Holmes] . . . have come to possess a separate and unmistakable identity, whose names and personal qualities are familiar to thousands who may not have read any of the works in which they appear" (The Development of the Detective Novel 167; qtd. in Marcello Truzzi, "Sherlock Holmes: Applied Social Psychologist" 55).

[8]In fact, one of the themes that runs through all of O'Brien's work is the fear of language as something that imprisons, constricts and determines. An alien language may be imposed from outside as in the case of the trial in English to which Gaelic speaker of The Poor Mouth is subjected, in the writings of the savant De Selby that obsess the nameless narrator of The Third Policeman, and in the image at once hilarious and nightmarish of anonymous blackmailing ventriloquists who threaten to insult hapless theater-goers, or worse, have them insult someone else (Best of Myles 24-40).

[9]Colin MacCabe suggests that a similar notion of language informs Joyce's work, and quotes Joyce's response to Valéry Larbaud's question of whether "quotations should go between quotation marks. Joyce replied that 'the fewer quotation marks the better' and even without them the reader 'will know early in the book that S.D's [sic] mind is full like everyone else's of borrowed words'" ("Letter to Valéry Larbaud," 4 June 1928; qtd. in Colin MacCabe, James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word 117).

[10]Almost any careful look at the narrator's language whether in character or as an author will reveal the stylistic marks which can be traced to their sources. One of many examples is the narrator's description of his first experiment with intoxicating beverages. He first subjects himself to an inward examination derived more or less directly from Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and proceeds to remark to his companion Kelly that "You can't beat a good pint" (28-29). Since this is the narrator's first encounter with a pint of any kind, it is clear that his comment is produced as an attempt to mimic what he thinks one ought to say in the context, and not one made on the basis of any first-hand knowledge of pints.

[11]He uses it frequently, but most notably (of course) in "The Myles na Gopaleen Catechism of Cliche":

At what time did he speak Irish?

At a time when it was neither profitable nor popular (Best of Myles 203).

[12]A related example in Joyce's writing is the "Nausicaa" episode of Ulysses in which Gerty MacDowell perceives the world through the language of romances, and becomes an author of a romance of which she is the heroine.

CHAPTER TWO

Authors and Worlds: Re-creating Reality.

Throughout his writing, Flann O'Brien explores the relation between the "real" world and the worlds that authors can create out of words. This concern underlies the proliferation and collapse of worlds in At Swim-Two-Birds, and can also be seen throughout the long career of "Cruiskeen Lawn," as well as in O'Brien's other writings such as his final bash at Joyce in his novel The Dalkey Archive, which presents a portrait of the artist as an old man. This chapter will examine the fictional construction of worlds in three contexts. The first is the Irish tradition of the power of the poet's satire; the second is the libellous practices of the authors of the Irish Renaissance and their representations of themselves and of each other; and the third context is Julia Kristeva's notion of "intertextuality." These ancient, "modern," and "post-modern" poetics and practices share an awareness of the power of words to act on and intervene in the social text. These three approaches will provide useful contexts in which to read At Swim-Two-Birds, since that novel presents its readers with a sustained meditation on the creative and transformative power of words.

A consideration of the ancient practices of Irish poets and scribes is especially relevant to any understanding of Flann O'Brien because of his extensive knowledge of that tradition. A native speaker of Irish, O'Brien also studied Middle and Old Irish, and could

write all three. At University College at Dublin, he did graduate work in Middle Irish.[1] Rather than examining O'Brien's use of specific material drawn from Old or Middle Irish, I wish to consider some of the more general attitudes to poetry, and, particularly, to satire that are embodied in the Gaelic material that O'Brien knew and loved. An understanding of the ways in which the words of poets were thought to have a direct and significant impact on the world around them is especially relevant to the world of At Swim-Two-Birds.

Although many fragments of satiric verse are extant, I will begin by quoting one not particularly remarkable for its ferocity, but which presents the spectacle of a poet satirizing a gift of butter, and by implication, whoever was so miserly as to consider rancid butter fit payment for a poet of Tadhg Dall O'Huigin's stature and ability:

A woman gave me butter now,
Good butter too it claimed to be.
I don't think it was from a cow,
And if it was it finished me.

A beard was growing on the stuff,
A beastly beard without a doubt,
The taste was sickly, sour and rough,
With poison juices seeping out.

The stuff had spots, the stuff was grey,
I doubt if any goat produced it.
I had to face it every day,
And how I wish I had refused it!

This splendid butter had a mane,
The glory of my humble home.
No knife could cut it down again,
It made me sick for weeks to come.

This nasty grease a wrapping had
Like a discarded winding sheet.
Its very aspect was so bad,
I scarcely had the nerve to eat.

This horror had a heavy stink
That left one fuddled, stunned and dead
'Twas rainbow-hued, with what you'd think
A crest of plumes above its head.

The salt's a thing it hardly knew,
In fact, I think they'd barely met.
It was not white, but rather blue.
I am not recovered yet.

'Twas made of grease and wax and fat,
O thoughts too horrible to utter!
You may be sure that after that,
I rather lost my taste for butter. (Irish Verse 111-12)

This poem is, perhaps, most remarkable for the way in which the reader's interest is held, in part, by the inventive protraction of the treatment of a subject which would apparently leave little room for elaboration. The technique employed in the poem resembles that of a "shaggy dog story" in which whatever humor there is accrues from repetitive variation on a theme, a technique that is also familiar to readers of both Flann O'Brien and Myles na Gopaleen.

More important, however, is the role that the poem would have played in the social context in which it was written. Presumably the niggardly gift-giver that the poem lampoons would have been recognizable to contemporaries, and the social standing of that individual would have been altered by the poem. Some indication of the impact that such satires had on individuals is that the author of this poem was killed by the irate victims of another of his satires.[2]

O'Brien's own attitude to the role that satire played in historical Ireland is difficult to determine, although he did address the subject in the persona of Myles na Gopaleen. In discussing Ireland's half-hearted attempt (as he saw it) to revive Gaelic, he describes the type of society of which that language was a part:

> The ancient native order was patriarchal and aristocratic, the people knew their place (i.e. the scullery) and "democracy", God help us, was unheard of. The administration of law was speedy and simple, because only a handful of people had "rights". An exclusive caste of poets discharged the functions of commentator and recorder, and these men acknowledged no one as their superiors. They were maintained in great luxury and treated with the reverence and circumspection that are reserved for those who are feared, for they could ruin a man with a poisonous couplet. They were the journalists of their day, and they had a traditional right to libel whom they pleased. What is the position of the journalist today? Let it suffice to say that in my own case, when I go out for a walk (of an evening) I deem it wiser to go disguised as a man! (Hair of the Dogma 5-6)

While a certain ambivalence is clearly apparent in this passage, one can also hear, without much difficulty, nostalgia for a period in which people listened to poets and writers. At the same time, O'Brien does not romanticize the period as anything other than classist and anti-democratic.

Nostalgia for bygone glories, and most especially, nostalgia for an aristocratic and patriarchal order in which poets received the respect that they deserved, was an idea that had been given fashionable currency by a number of (surprisingly) poets and other writers of the Celtic revival, among whom the most prominent was William Butler Yeats. The success of Yeats' self-conscious attempt to forge a "mythology" for Ireland is, perhaps, most obvious in the way that much of the material that he introduced into the literary scene now seems to have always been there. In a sense, it was always present, inasmuch as Yeats sought material from a number of sources with varying connections to Irish tradition, ranging from the peasants in the environs of Lady Gregory's estate to stories from extant Old and Middle Irish manuscripts. He was certainly not the first to turn

to ancient and indigenous Irish material as a source, but he was particularly influential, and he left his own stamp on the way the Gaelic revivalists imagined the ancient and pre-historic periods.[3]

Because the Yeatsian imprimatur is so pervasive, it is somewhat difficult to isolate. I will concentrate on a representative example of the result of Yeats' imaginative engagement with more or less traditional material. I will consider the romantic figure of Red Hanrahan because, as a poet, Hanrahan represents the author function. At Swim-Two-Birds may contain an oblique allusion to Red Hanrahan in the title of William Tracy's "Red Flanagan's Last Throw" (74).[4]

Yeats' Red Hanrahan is the central character in a volume of stories that bears his name. Hanrahan is a curious blend of the figure of the feared and respected poet out of ancient tradition and the popular figure of the roving and eloquent beggarman. In part, this mélange testifies to Yeats' disputable notion that contemporary peasants were the true inheritors of the ancient aristocratic Irish culture.

Whatever his roots, Hanrahan emerges as a compelling character in his own right. One of the most powerful stories is "Red Hanrahan's Curse." The aging Hanrahan is confronted with the spectacle of a local girl weeping in dread of a forced marriage to an old man. He proffers his aid in rather stage-Irish terms:

> "If there is any sorrow on you it is I myself should be well able to serve you," he said then, "for it is I know the history of the Greeks, and I know well what sorrow is and parting, and the hardship of the world. And if I am not able to save you from trouble," he said, "there is many a one I have saved from it with the power that is in my songs, as it was in the songs of the poets that were before me from the beginning of the world. And it is with the rest of the poets I myself will be sitting and talking

> in some far place beyond the world, to the end of life and time," he said. (239-240)

His offer is accepted. The young girl tells him of the aging and undesired bridegroom, Paddy Doe, and requests that Hanrahan "put him into a rhyme" (240). Although she has offended the poet by comparing him with the ancient bridegroom, Hanrahan obliges with a curse on age.[5]

Yeats alludes to the tradition of the power of the poet's satire, and connects Hanrahan with it, although the latter apparently lives many years after the destruction of the traditional poetry, the Gaelic language of that poetry, and the aristocracy that supported the poets. Yeats explicitly links Hanrahan with that tradition when Hanrahan connects himself to the "poets that were before . . . from the beginning of the world" (242).

However, Yeats' own invention or his debt to other traditions shows through this apparently folkloric evocation of an ancient but vital tradition. A word like "bard" has passed from Irish into English, and occupies a status similar to the Irish word "druid." Both conjure images that are vaguely romantic and appeal to a general European nostalgia for a distant golden age. Yet, as Greene also points out, "bard" in middle Irish usage "indicated low rank" as opposed to a higher status of filé (39). The point is that where Yeats appears to be drawing on Irish tradition, he is not.[6] Hanrahan, as a romantic and solitary poet, is derived as much from sources such as Matthew Arnold's "The Scholar Gipsy" as from records or accounts of poets from Early or Middle Irish periods.[7] This is not to suggest that the image of the poet that Yeats presents in Hanrahan (or in

himself, for that matter) is unIrish. In fact, that image is more thoroughly assimilated to "Irishness" than the image presented by historical accounts of the poets as court-attached, sycophantic, and mercenary.[8]

The role that Yeats played both in what is usually termed "reviving" but could perhaps be more accurately called "inventing" Irish traditions, Irish mythologies, and an Irish literary past can be seen in miniature in the implications of a question he poses in the final lines of his last play, The Death of Cuchulain:

> Are those things that men adore and loathe
> Their sole reality?
> What stood in the Post office
> With Pearse and Connolly?
> What comes out of the mountain
> Where men first shed their blood?
> Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed
> He stood where they had stood?
> * * *
> A statue's there to mark the place,
> By Oliver Sheppard done.
> So ends the tale that the harlot
> Sang to the beggar-man. (Selected Plays 241-2)

Yeats had been attempting to forge a national mythology which would include such heroes as Cuchulain, and he had written a whole cycle of plays that centered on the single figure of Cuchulain. Padraig Pearse, for comparable reasons, and, partially as a result of the general climate to which Yeats contributed, had also in Kenner's words "made a cult of Cuchulain" (176). Kenner goes on to describe the statue mentioned above by Yeats:

> [I]n the lobby of the restored post office, you will find today a bronze Cuchulain. He is dying tied to a stake, the way the bronze-age Cuchulain died, upright: the way the Easter 1916 martyrs died when the firing squads levelled their rifles. (A Colder Eye 176-77)

The situation in Dublin's Post Office is comparable to that in At Swim-Two-Birds, as is obvious as soon as one tries to count Cuchulains. There are a bewildering plurality of Cuchulains in the Post Office. To begin with, there is Oliver Sheppard's statue, which joins Pearse's imaginings of Cuchulain as well as a vision of Pearse as Cuchulain. Furthermore, one can add Yeats' various presentations of Cuchulain, and, indeed, Kenner suggests that occasionally Yeats also imagined himself as the legendary hero (A Colder Eye 39). To that one must add the numerous differing tales concerning Cuchulain, and the different versions of the different tales, and finally, the many adaptations of those tales; there is world of difference between Lady Gregory's twilight Cuchulain of Muirthemne and Thomas Kinsella's stark The Tain, not to mention a host of others. And finally, was there ever a historical character? And if so, does that have anything to do with the different stories?

Thus, Yeats, among others, "thought" and wrote Cuchulain until he did stand in the Post Office. The evocation of the character by different individuals meant that the character escaped the control of any one "author." Although many aspects of At Swim-Two-Birds could be compared with the scenario described above, one that is especially relevant is the narrator's "thinking" Finn Mac Cool until he appears. Once Finn Mac Cool appears, Trellis attempts to make a specific use of that character in his writing, but is forestalled by Orlick, who uses Finn for yet another purpose.[9] The presentation in At Swim-Two-Birds of characters created by an author's telling who escape from the tale appears less fantastic and, even, to stretch the term, realistic.

Just as a character can be brought from the world of literature into the world of action, so too, can the inverse operation occur, as O'Brien notes in "A Bash in the Tunnel," his discussion of Joyce. O'Brien describes an encounter between a friend and a "well-known savant who appears in Ulysses" who has not heard of Joyce outside of "certain rumours" that he "had written some dirty books, published in Paris" (206). When the startling information is imparted to this same individual that he appears in one of the books, dinner is interrupted:

> The next two hours, to the neglect of wine and cigars, were occupied with a heated statement by the savant that he was by no means a character in fiction, he was a man, furthermore he was alive and he had published books of his own.[10]

The savant reasonably, but nonetheless ridiculously, demands "How can I be a character in fiction, if I am here talking to you?" O'Brien concludes:

> That incident may be funny, too, but its curiosity is this: Joyce spent a lifetime establishing himself as a character in fiction. Joyce created, in narcissus fascination, the ageless Stephen. Beginning with importing real characters into his books, he achieves the magnificent inversion of making them legendary and fictional. It is quite preposterous. Thousands of people believe that there once lived a man named Sherlock Holmes.[11] ("A Bash in the Tunnel" 206-7)

And, as in the case of Cuchulain in the Post Office, the situation assumes the O'Brienesque superimposition and counterversion which results in a proliferation of text and the annihilation of any possibility of certainty.

Gogarty records in As I was Walking Down Sackville Street a portion of the hostilities between George Moore and Yeats, and, in passing, suggests the motivation behind a writer's decision to represent an acquaintance in print: "Making your rival ridiculous is the chief aim of Irish opponents since the duel was abolished. And in his trilogy Ave, Salve, Vale, Moore mocked at Yeats" (110). As Gogarty notes in A Week End in the Middle of the Week, Moore leaves Yeats on record as resembling "an umbrella forgotten at a pic-nic" (141). Yeats retaliates by immortalizing Moore as a man who, in Kenner's words, "did not know as late as middle life how to keep his underpants where they belonged:"

> He [Moore] said to a friend: "How do you keep your pants from falling about your knees?" "O," said the friend, "I put my braces through the little tapes that are sewn there for the purpose." A few days later he thanked the friend with emotion.[12]

A character who has received comparable treatment from an author might well attempt to write, if only in self-defense. In addition to witnessing the Moore/Yeats feud, Gogarty, himself, got conscripted into works by Moore and, later, and with much greater notoriety, Joyce. Gogarty naturally responded by writing books of his own in which the authors mentioned above serve as characters.[13]

While all of the various representations and mis-representations perpetuated by most members of the Irish cultural scene should be kept in mind when considering O'Brien's treatment of Trellis, I will focus here on the implications of Joyce and Gogarty's mutual representations. To begin with Joyce, there is first Stephen Dedalus as an autobiographical character, or as a version of Joyce transposed

into fiction;[14] there is also a character such as "Buck" Mulligan, generally read as a portrait of Oliver St. John Gogarty. However, Gogarty also did his own autobiographical writings in which he depicted Joyce. At which point, there are Joyce's "Joyce" and Joyce's "Gogarty," and then there are Gogarty's "Gogarty" and Gogarty's "Joyce", some of which share characteristics or similar experiences, but which are, on the whole, quite different characters.[15]

In the context of the Yeats/Moore feud, Gogarty suggested that revenge is the strongest motive for writing; he repeats that idea in less sanguine terms in his 1939 review of Finnegans Wake. Joyce's motive, Gogarty wrote was resentment:

> Resentment against his upbringing, his surroundings, and finally against the system of civilization throughout Europe, perhaps against Life itself which Finnegan may represent, created this literary Bolshevism which strikes not only at all standards and accepted modes of expression whether of Beauty or Truth but at the very vehicle of rational expression. (674-75)[16]

Despite its obvious hyperbole, Gogarty's basic perception does not appear invalid. A similar sentiment surfaces ominously in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man when Stephen Dedalus asserts "This race and this country and this life produced me. . . I shall express myself as I am," (469)[17] which is shortly followed by Stephen's re-imaging of Ireland as "the old sow who eats her farrow" (470). This frequently quoted comment should be set in the context of the efforts of nationalist mythologists (such as Yeats) who were striving to create images of Ireland that would lead to pride, but, also, to the willingness to fight and die for that image. Stephen rejects and inverts such images, and, in turn, he produces one based on the long

history of mutual betrayal of Irish by Irish. Stephen begins with something akin the vision of the country as "the silk of the kine," exchanges the cow for another domestic animal, and adds maternal cannibalism. In Stephen's world view this makes sense; he sees Ireland as responsible for his existence, but he also sees the production of an "Irish" mythology which demands that he sacrifice himself for "Ireland."

Flann O'Brien responds to Joyce in a variety of ways in At Swim-Two-Birds, but unquestionably the most direct occurs in the novel's (ultimate) conclusion. The final pages of At Swim-Two-Birds are possibly the most remarkable achievement of that book, and are, I will argue, the point where a number of the novel's tangled threads come together. O'Brien revises Joyce's revision of Ireland by presenting a new image of the artist that inverts Joyce's inverted image of Ireland. This occurs in the consideration of madness that recalls Stephen's discourse on Shakespeare that occurs in Ulysses, and may also mark the beginnings of a critical exegesis of At Swim-Two-Birds.[18] An apparently unencountered voice questions whether Trellis was mad, and adduces the testimony of numerous sources. We read:

> Even experts do not agree on these vital points. Professor Unternehmer, the eminent German neurologist, points to Claudius as a lunatic but allows Trellis an inverted sow neurosis wherein the farrow eat their dam. (217)

Before returning to the context of this passage, I would like to consider its implication in the world of which Joyce was a part, and which is now perceived, in part, as Joyce created it. If Joyce perceived that Ireland demanded something of him which he was

unwilling to give, O'Brien saw clearly that in writing about Ireland, Joyce was using Ireland in much the same way that he refused to be used; that is to say, that Joyce was remaking Ireland for his own ends, just as "Ireland" represented a mythology that would "remake" an individual into a martyr.

This is a single facet of O'Brien's response to Joyce and the more general literary climate. Here and elsewhere O'Brien is both less antagonistic and considerably more sophisticated than he has been given credit for. The vast majority of critics who have remarked on the relation of O'Brien to Joyce have considered O'Brien to be derivative or imitative, and have suggested that At Swim-Two-Birds can be best understood as a parody of Ulysses.[19] Denis Johnston expresses the inadequacy of such a response:

> As is the usual practice with any new piece of fiction that is at all out of the ordinary in its structure, it was immediately classified by second-line critics as coming from the school of Joyce and Beckett. This is nonsense in my opinion. In the first place Myles belongs on the opposite side of the very significant generation gap that separates him from the "transition" crowd, and he is not writing about his homeland, but in it. He is neither an Emigré nor a nostalgic Yearner for other days. It is true that in his devotion to parody he is at one with most of his Irish predecessors, but his technique and structure are his own inventions. (301)[20]

Johnston's point is a necessary corrective to an ongoing critical tendency. However, it should be added that although O'Brien is not derivative of Joyce, O'Brien certainly engages with his predecessor.[21]

Joyce's writing was motivated by a desire to contain or evade the "nets" of Irish cultural discourse which he did through parody and satire. This revolt, although based in part on the principle of non serviam, was called "noble" by O'Brien ("A Bash in the Tunnel" 207).

Many critics have considered Joyce's use of parody as a necessary distancing device, as in, for example, Maureen Waters' exploration of Joyce's treatment of Gogarty, or Kenner's summation that the technique that underlies all of Joyce's work is parody or "double-writing," and, particularly, a parody of Dublin (Dublin's Joyce 11). Kenner argues:

> He focussed, that is to say, on what was actually there, and strove so to set it down that it would reveal itself as what it was, in its double nature: a distortion, but a distortion of something real. All his characters are walking clichés, because the Dubliners were. (11)

For O'Brien, both Joyce and his various representations of Dublin also became clichés. Since, in his revolt Joyce transfixed in text a number of real individuals, and, furthermore, created a fiction which has, to some degree, substituted for "reality," the discourse created by Joyce is, itself, tyrannical. It is that discourse that O'Brien seeks to upset through parody.

In At Swim-Two-Birds Flann O'Brien responds to the twin spectacles of individuals revenging themselves on others by impaling them in books and of authors and characters changing places: he does so by presenting a comically foreshortened view of characters becoming authors and vice-versa. That O'Brien also responds directly to Joyce is primarily a result of O'Brien's fascination with the power of writing, the control of the author and the question of the interrelation of literature and life.[22]

O'Brien's use of parody can therefore be understood as similar to Joyce's, except that the scope of O'Brien's parody comprehends Joyce as well as the other dominating influences or nets with which

both struggled. Waters aptly describes the relation between the two writers:

> O'Brien explored the relation between past and present, between mythic Gael and the cautious citizen of Dublin. Like Joyce he was passionately concerned with the imaginative life of the artist in a culture divided against itself. And while Joyce satirized the leaders of the Revival in order to define his own position, O'Brien satirized Joyce for much the same reason. His fiction is filled with mocking echoes of the great artificer. (123)[23]

What meets in both Ulysses and At Swim-Two-Birds is a curious mixture of literature and "reality" with the added complication that reality is in part constructed by literature and that literature borrows from reality. But one important difference is that Ulysses has become part of the cultural text.

As many critics of At Swim-Two-Birds have noted. a number of figures in the novel recall Joycean characters or poses. Thus, the indigent and dirty collegiate narrator recalls the Stephen Dedalus of A Portrait of the Author as a Young Man; Trellis suggests the idea, expressed in A Portrait, of the Godlike author; and the uncle, as well as most of the other Dubliners in At Swim-Two-Birds, seems straight out of Joyce's Dubliners.[24]

The connection between Trellis and Joyce is a sustained and significant example of O'Brien's "mocking echoes" of Joyce. O'Brien saw Joyce as an essentially moral author, but expressed the following reservations: "But not until James Joyce came along has anybody so considerably evoked depravity to establish the inextinguishable goodness of what is good" ("J-Day" 16). And it is in precisely those

terms that the protagonist of At Swim-Two-Birds describes the author at the Red Swan Hotel:

> Trellis, I answered steadily, is writing a book on sin and the wages attaching thereto. He is a philosopher and a moralist. He is appalled by the spate of sexual and other crimes recorded in recent time in the newspapers-particularly in those published on Saturday night.
>
> Nobody will read the like of that, said Brinsley.
>
> Yes they will, I answered. Trellis wants this salutary book to be read by all. He realizes that purely a moralizing tract would not reach the public. Therefore he is putting plenty of smut into his book. There will be no less than seven indecent assaults on young girls and any amount of bad language. There will be whiskey and porter for further orders.
>
> I thought there was to be no boozing, Brinsley said.
>
> No unauthorized boozing, I answered. Trellis has absolute control over his minions but this control is abandoned when he falls asleep. (35)

The irony is that most of the characters, especially the central villain, Furriskey, who is "so bad that he must be created ab ovo et initio" (35), do not use their freedom for greater villainies but, rather, for the reverse, as described in the "Synopsis, being a summary of what has gone before, FOR THE BENEFIT OF NEW READERS:"

> Furriskey . . . praises her and they discover after a short time that they have fallen in love with each other at first sight. They arrange to lead virtuous lives, to simulate the immoral actions, thoughts and words which Trellis demands of them on pain of the severest penalties. They also arrange that the first of them who shall be free shall wait for the other with a view to marriage at the earliest opportunity. (60-61)

Trellis' novel was, ostensibly, to be highly moral, but it would have been indistinguishable from the "Saturday night" newspapers whose lurid and voyeuristic reportage of crime has provoked the novel. If the implication were not already clear that, rather than producing an edifying and salubrious book, Trellis is simply staging his own

desire, the final twist is that although the character created expressly by the author to be a "man of unexampled depravity," and to attack Sheila Lamont, rebels in favor of a quiet, married life, the author, "so far forgets himself as to assault her himself" (35, 61).

The author, Trellis, is writing a book that he intends to address the moral health of the world around him which, since he never goes out, he apparently knows only through the Saturday night newspapers. What becomes obvious is that the shape of the book is actually determined by his own (questionable) psyche. It is in this context that Trellis' first description "of his projected labour" can be understood: ". . . It appeared to him that a great and a daring book--a green book--was the crying need of the hour--a true book that would show the terrible cancer of sin in its true light and act as a clarion-call to torn humanity" (36). One obvious qualification is that this much-needed book is a clearly related to Trellis' peculiar neurosis that allows him to read only green books.[25] Trellis--like Stephen Dedalus--aims to forge "the uncreated conscience of [his] race" (Portrait 526), but however worthy that aim might be, it is completely undercut by the way in which Trellis remains blind to himself and to his own implication in what he wishes to obliterate.

There is, however, a second Joyce analogue who is Trellis' son, begotten by a rape committed by his father.[26] Orlick Trellis commences writing out of the motive of revenging his mother. As we have seen, revenge is the motive O'Brien attributed to Joyce, but O'Brien emphasizes the identification by having the Pooka instruct the young Trellis in the principles of "evil, revolt, and non-serviam" (150). Orlick Trellis' motive for revenge certainly seems justifiable

enough, and the indignities that are forced on the other characters reprehensible enough, that Orlick likely has the reader's sympathy when, with the encouragement of his friends, he first wrests control of the novel from his father.

However, by the end of the novel, the situation is somewhat more complex. Orlick's treatment of his father is clearly sadistic, and he has also conscripted his fellow characters into a new work of fiction. Their situation is thus that they have temporarily escaped imprisonment in the writing of the elder Trellis only to be caricatured by the younger. Whatever justification there may have been in the revolt of the younger Trellis is dissipated by the fact that the younger reproduces the tyranny of his father's discourse.

A connection to the ideal of the artist as set forth in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is suggested by the Pooka's description of his vocation as "fraught with responsibilities, not the least of these being the lamming and leathering of such parties as are sent to me for treatment by Number One, which is the First Good and Primal Truth and necessarily an odd number" (107). When Orlick Trellis decides to "requisition the services of the Pooka MacPhellimey," (172) he, then, occupies the place of Number One, and is linked with the "artist, like the God of the creation." However, unlike Stephen's artist, Orlick, far from being "invisible" or "refined out of existence," is very visible indeed (Portrait 483).

To return to the question of the father, I have argued that the elder Trellis' "moral" intention to write an assault is revealed as a real desire which he stages. The question of the degree of "reality"

as opposed to "fictionality" attained by the offspring of the author's assault of his character is raised by the anonymous student:

> It may be usefully mentioned here that I had carefully considered giving an outward indication of the son's semi-humanity by furnishing him with only the half of a body. Here I encountered further difficulties. If given the upper half only, it would be necessary to provide a sedan-chair or litter with at least two runners or scullion-boys to operate it. The obtrusion of two further characters would lead to complications, the extent of which could not be foreseen. On the other hand, to provide merely the lower half, videlicet, the legs and lumbar region, would be to narrow unduly the validity of the son and confine his activities to walking, running, kneeling and kicking football. (145)[27]

Despite (or, perhaps, because of) the mocking tone, the reader is asked to consider the relation between the "real" and the "fictive." Trellis' "real" desire causes him to create a "fictive" character who is subjected to a "real" assault, and that results in the creation of a character of dubious half-fictive, half-real status. To return briefly to the Post Office, surely a character like Cuchulain occupies exactly that twilight.

The idea that "fiction" can be a real part of how an individual perceives the world is one of the most central notions that is explored throughout Joyce's writing, but where Joyce explores the matrix of various literary styles and the ways in which various characters perceive the world, O'Brien foregrounds the implication of the author in the depiction of character and style.[28] To return to Trellis' desire to write an edifying book which seems to be indistinguishable from Saturday night newspapers, and is ultimately revealed as the desire to enact the crimes he would decry, Trellis'

desire to represent an assault can be connected with the nameless narrator's representation of Trellis' assault.[29]

However, to take this argument further, a representation of an assault is, in itself, an assault. Thus, just as Trellis' attempt to depict immorality results in the re-enactment of immorality, so the narrator's representation also participates in a re-enactment of that offence in which the narrator vicariously participates. Susanne Kappeler, in her discussion of the film Fitzcarraldo, describes perfectly the real results of representations that I have been trying to suggest:

> Werner Herzog, celebrated cineast of the cultured avant-garde, produces Fitzcarraldo, a film about the massive mega-ego of a colonialist who wants to build an operahouse in the middle of the Peruvian jungle and who, in order to carry out his plan, makes a crowd of native Indians carry a steam boat over a hill. The left-wing critic is satisfied: the film exposes (shows up) the massive arrogance of a latterday colonialist industrialist. No mention of the fact that the massively inflated mega-ego of a western cineast repeats this self-same act of colonial imperialism and arrogance, carrying the production of his film into the jungle like the opera of Fitzcarraldo, and making, in the process of his venture, a crowd of native Indians carry a steam boat over the self-same hill, impervious to the effect of his own intervention in the economic and cultural situation of the native population. (113)

To return to Joyce, the mythology created by the Irish Revivalists that writers owe their services to Ireland or to a mystical image of Ireland is undercut by Joyce's creation of a new myth about Ireland (the sow that eats her farrow): the role of the artist is also revisioned by Joyce both in his own person and in the character of Stephen Dedalus who allows himself only "silence, exile and cunning" (519). Joyce's own departure from Ireland also enters

the cultural text. Brendan Hehir argues that where both O'Brien and Joyce were confronted with the same nets, Joyce escaped them and O'Brien did not. However, O'Brien could never simply have imitated Joyce. For O'Brien and those after Joyce, his example, itself, became another net to trap the unwary. I do not mean to suggest that Joyce was not justified in his attitudes or even that the attitudes that I have attributed to him were unambiguously held, but that just as Joyce perceives a destructive aspect to some of the images cultivated by Yeats and others, so O'Brien perceives the same destructive potential in myths associated with Joyce.[30] I do not wish to attempt to address all the ways in which O'Brien responds to Joyce, but I have tried to show how O'Brien includes the process of writing within the book, and thereby lays bare the role of the author. O'Brien depicts a Joycean author who is scourged by a vengeful offspring, thus suggesting what would be the logical vengeance on Joyce, and simultaneously enacting that revenge.

I would like to return to the "Conclusion of the book, ultimate" and to the questions and confusion with which O'Brien ends At Swim-Two-Birds. I will resist the urge to quote it in full. It begins "Evil is even, truth is an odd number and death is a full stop," and comes to a full stop with:

> Numbers, however, will account for a great proportion of unbalanced and suffering humanity. One man will rove the streets seeking motor-cars with numbers that are divisible by seven. Well-known, alas, is the case of the poor German who was very fond of three and who made each aspect of his life a thing of triads. He went home one evening and drank three cups of tea with three lumps of sugar in each cup, cut his jugular with a razor three times and scrawled with a dying hand on a picture of his wife good-bye, good-bye, good-bye. (217-8)

The ending is powerful and arresting. The three "good-bye"s recall the three openings, so, like Finnegans Wake, the novel returns to its own beginning. Remembering the colloquy between the Pooka and the Good Fairy, the reader might wonder if there is safety in this triad, or even truth (106). One critic has described it as a nihilistic assertion of the end of art:[31] "The book ends in a flurry of self-mocking images of lunacy and suicide: art turned upon itself, feeding upon itself, brought to a terrible impasse" (Waters 136).[32] While Waters' interpretation is convincing, I would like to suggest that it is partial, and that the conclusion can be seen in another context, one in which any boundary between "reality" and "fiction" has been completely obscured. In this context, Trellis can be seen as having confused the two when he attributed to his characters his own desires, and, even more so, when his characters are presented as having the power to control his life.[33] Just as Trellis is fixated on green books, the German student is obsessed with the number three. Both idiosyncratic obsessions are presumably delusions and are a part of a fantasy or unreal world, but the consequences that such beliefs can have in the real world is brought home abruptly with the image of the dying German student with his throat slit in triplicate. In the final image, "reality" and "fantasy" have become indistinguishable. The final tableau confronts readers for the last time with the spectacle of the absorption of the "real" by the "unreal."

I will turn to Julia Kristeva's notion of "intertextuality", to provide a model for describing the complex relation between reality and literature that O'Brien depicts. Hutcheon's compact summary of Kristeva will serve to introduce her theory of intertextuality:

> When Julia Kristeva . . . coined the term, she noted that there were three elements involved besides the text under consideration: the author, the reader, and the other exterior texts. (A Theory of Parody 87)

The impulse behind Kristeva's expanded notion of text is not to produce a hopelessly expanded and completely unworkable concept, but to confront precisely the interactive worlds of texts and social contexts that writers such as O'Brien explore. Kristeva argues that any text will be unable to avoid containing references that point outside the text:

> . . . any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double. (Desire 66)

Thus, the Dublin portrayed in Joyce's Ulysses is itself a mosaic or "general text" that includes Joyce's knowledge of the city of that name, references to material that he deemed relevant, and allusions to his earlier evocations of Dublin in Dubliners and Portrait. For O'Brien, scraps of Dublin conversation overheard in a pub can recall Joyce's writing.[34] Thus, O'Brien's Dublin includes, and has been altered by, Joyce's Dublin. In this way, Joyce's texts have joined with other cultural discourses and have become part of the larger text of Dublin. Leonard Orr underscores the paradoxical implications when he notes that: "Leopold and Molly Bloom have more 'reality' than the couple that actually lived at 7 Eccles Street in 1904" (816). Kenner illustrates the same point when he notes that just as Cuchulain has had a statue erected to his memory, so, too, the birthplace of Leopold Bloom has received a bronze plaque (A Colder Eye 272).

Flann O'Brien was intensely aware of the way in which Joyce had intervened in his world. However, the later writer was also aware that just as Joyce's fiction could affect the reality of Dublin, so too, could O'Brien intervene in the effect of Joyce's fiction, as he makes clear in a letter describing his intentions in writing The Dalkey Archive, which, he says, "is not a novel, though on the surface there is a perfectly coherent story:" "The book is really an essay in extreme derision of literary attitudes and people, and one pervasive fault is absence of emphasis, in certain places, to help the reader" ("A Sheaf of Letters" 85). O'Brien makes clear his attempt to intervene not only in the way in which Joyce is read, but in a whole cultural network of ideas surrounding the artist that O'Brien in part blamed on Joyce, but more on those who read him.

This interplay between texts and history is described by Kristeva's term "ambivalence" which, she suggests "implies the insertion of history (society) into a text and of this text into history; for the writer, they are one and the same" (Desire 68). Thus, Joyce's Ulysses is part of history, both as a historical document and, more importantly, in the sense that it proposes new ways of seeing the past (for example, Joyce's substitution of a matrix of images of Ireland as betrayer to replace Irish Revival images of Ireland as betrayed). Ulysses became a monument in terms of which all other texts were judged (as is still the case: Ulysses is the great "modern" novel, and now we are in the "post-modern period"). O'Brien attempted to write texts that would recontextualize Joyce's writing and thereby result in Ulysses occupying a less privileged position in relation to Irish writing and culture.

O'Brien's project is not confined to Joyce. In his use of the Sweeny tale, he brings forward material from Middle Irish, but not in the mythopoeic fashion of someone like Yeats. O'Brien's use of that material makes it part of a modern literary landscape in a way that is neither simply nostalgic nor simply parodic.[35] At Swim-Two-Birds can be seen as a text within which more than two texts meet. More accurately, At Swim-Two-Birds can be seen to relativize the multitude of texts and textual practices that it includes. O'Brien can therefore be seen as being engaged in a "writing where one reads the other," or, perhaps, others (Desire 68).

Critics have suggested that something similar occurs in At Swim-Two-Birds. Perhaps the earliest and best example is Graham Greene's comment that the novel "presented simultaneously all of Ireland's literary traditions" (41). However, the implications of that feat have not been explored. In At Swim-Two-Birds, even more so than in The Dalkey Archive, "the fault is absence of emphasis in certain places," and, for that reason, critics have failed to come to grips with O'Brien's world. I will return once more to the three endings, but this time I do not mean the repetition of "good-bye," but, rather, the three levels of story that are brought to successive closes in the "Conclusion of the book antepenultimate. Biographical reminiscence part the final," "Conclusion of the book, penultimate," and "Conclusion of the book, ultimate" (208, 215, 216). As we have seen, the ominously named "Conclusion of the book, ultimate" contains images of Joycean art and the endless exegesis that it has entailed, mixed with both suicide and an endless Wakean recirculation. That way madness lies.[36]

However, the penultimate conclusion, offers a different view. Trellis is rescued from the world of his creation when Teresa

> revived the fire and made a good blaze by putting into it several sheets of writing which were littered here and there about the floor (not improbably a result of the open window). By a curious coincidence as a matter of fact strange to say it happened that these same pages were those of the master's novel, the pages which made and sustained the existence of Furriskey and his true friends. (215-6)

O'Brien's deliberate piling up of "By a curious coincidence as a matter of fact strange to say it happened" draws the readers' attention to the author who is in control at all times and can make anything happen. What appears to be an attempt to explain a crucial (and predictable) plot development as a coincidence serves to make readers look more carefully and critically at the dénouement that the writer announces as fortuitous. Trellis is left reflecting on the implications of Teresa's corset as an image of art.[37] His last words, "Ars est celare artem," are a dubious pun which represents a safer engagement in the play of words than we have seen heretofore (314).[38]

However, it is the first of the three endings that I find most interesting. In the ultimate conclusion, the German student says "good-bye," in the penultimate ending that we have just seen, Trellis mutters a punning reflection on the nature of art, and in the antepenultimate conclusion the nameless narrator is seen for the last time, amid a last flurry of text. The student has just returned home after learning that he has (somehow) done very well at College. When his uncle says, "I want a word with you," the student, not surprisingly, decides to delay so as to anger the uncle (302). The

narrator passes the time by reading, and At Swim-Two-Birds, in the fashion to which we are accustomed, reproduces what he reads.

When he goes down to face his uncle, presumably expecting (and, in part, provoking) the kind of confrontation that we have seen earlier, he describes his uncle in the same detached, ironic, and dehumanizing fashion that we have witnessed. Instead of the scolding he expects, he is, instead, congratulated by the uncle and Mr. Corcoran who have somehow found out about his academic success.

> How did you find out about it? I asked.
> Oh, never you mind now, said my uncle with a suitable gesture. The old boys know a thing or two. There are more things in life and death than you ever dreamt of, Horatio. (310)

The words that the uncle choses recall other Dubliners both in O'Brien's world and Joyce's. The first sentence that the uncle speaks is pure Dublin cliché (if such a thing be pure), and the second is a rather atrocious, but somehow apposite misquotation of Hamlet. The uncle struts in borrowed style while he enjoys a small triumph over his nephew, but at the same time, even as his words ring false, he is attempting to express a genuine feeling, and the student reacts to him accordingly:

> My uncle had evinced unsuspected traits of character and had induced in me an emotion of surprise and contrition extremely difficult of literary rendition or description. (215)

Thus, in one way or another, the three artists are reduced to silence, although in the case of the narrator, he is permitted a last observation that the watch is incorrect.[39]

By the end of the novel, all the authors are reduced to various conditions of silence and impotence, and become comparable to their characters. In addition, all levels of discourse are leveled, and the author's dream of a mastering language becomes impossible. Micheal Byrne observes that the manuscript, "involves several planes and dimensions," without observing that he himself exists in one of them (101). The dimension that the narrator records as "reality" ("Biographical reminiscence, part the first" etc.) simply exists as another level of fiction. When Byrne first hears the name of the narrator's author/protagonist, he wonders if he knows Trellis: however Byrne quickly places Trellis in the "unreal" world of the novel once he learns of some of Trellis' less usual habits (99). In so doing, he correctly delineates the boundary between the "real" world that he inhabits and the world of fiction.[40]

To return to Kristeva, it becomes clear that At Swim-Two-Birds forces readers to confront what she calls "the passage from one sign system to another." She continues:

> In this connection we examined the formation of a specific signifying system--the novel--as the result of a redistribution of several different sign systems: carnival, courtly poetry, scholastic discourse. The term inter-textuality denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another. (Revolution 59-60)

O'Brien's text enacts the endless passage from sign system to sign system through his inclusion of texts drawn from Middle Irish, Old Irish, obscure and apocryphal books, a racing sharp's letters, a Christian Brothers' Reader, Westerns, and many, many more. In this multiplication of text and discourse, O'Brien may still be linked to Joyce, but where Joyce seems to retain the dream of a "language which

is above all languages, a language to which all will do service," O'Brien relinquishes that dream, and his authors/protagonists are forced to accept many unmasterable languages.[41]

At Swim-Two-Birds presents a variety of transgressions of the boundaries that keep one "sign system" safe from another. To return to the narrator's theory of literature, he believes that the "modern novel should be largely a work of reference," which suggests a textual world self-consciously dependant on intertextuality. It also implies that the modern novelist should be able to draw on novels of the past in the mastering and plagiaristic way that Trellis does (33). However, Trellis is put on trial, among other offenses, for plagiarism.

What Trellis has done is appropriate the words and ideas of another author and bend them to his own use. In so doing, he is linked to many other characters and authors in the book for whom the rest of the world exists as a limbo from which to draw characters, ideas or words. Just as Orlick borrows the story of Sweeny's madness as a vehicle for his revenge or the uncle misquotes and misapplies Hamlet's words, so all language is constantly being reused, and, from the perspective of its previous employer, abused.

Trellis is, then, not simply condemned, but is put in the position of being treated by a writer in a fashion similar to the one employed by himself as a writer. Just as Trellis senior is willing to make use of Finn Mac Cool and to plagiarize William Tracy, so Orlick Trellis kidnaps his father and borrows the story of Sweeny's madness (which Finn also tells). Predictably, a curious symmetry emerges. If the Joycean Artist figure sees history as a nightmare from which he is

trying to awake, history is also trying to awaken from him; but, as Furriskey says of Trellis, "He can't complain that he didn't get fair play. He got a fair trial and a jury of his own manufacture" (301).

NOTES: CHAPTER TWO

[1]The subject of O'Brien's knowledge and use of Old and Middle Irish literary material in At Swim-Two-Birds is one that has recently been treated at some length, most notably by Eva Wäppling in her monograph Four Irish Legendary Figures in At Swim-Two-Birds: A Study of Flann O'Brien's Use of Finn, Suibhne, the Pooka and the Good Fairy.

[2]See Vivian Mercier (137). Another example of the power of a curse, and one particularly germane to At Swim-Two-Birds, is Wäppling's suggestion that Sweeny may have gone mad "because he heard some poems about himself" (58). In The Irish Comic Tradition, Mercier explores the satiric tradition and its relation to modern Irish writers in considerable depth. Mercier makes a very strong case for the power and influence of the poet's curse or satire in early Irish society. One particularly interesting point that Mercier draws from the work of Fred Robinson concerns the Irish word aer (Modern Irish aor or aoir),

> which eventually came to mean "satire" in the most general sense--while retaining the earlier meanings of "lampoon, personal attack in prose or verse, curse"--must originally have signified "spell" or "enchantment". As Robinson shows by copious reference to the literature, an aer was believed to have power to cause facial blemishes, or even death, in its victim. This power could be exercised on rats and mice as well as humans--a belief which gave rise to more-or-less humorous references by Shakespeare, Spenser, Sidney, and other English writers. (106)

Mercier suggests that this use of satire was probably more important and widespread than the relatively few surviving examples would suggest. Satire and invective was not preserved in written manuscripts to the same extent as some of the more innocuous forms of poetry for the simple reason that the earliest scribes in Ireland were Christians, and "many monks would balk at recording such litanies of spite, which were essentially pagan in spirit" (127).

Mercier also argues that this practice survives in both the oral tradition and in succeeding generations of Irish and Irish influenced writers. In this context, it is important to realize that O'Brien was very familiar both with the tradition as it had survived in manuscripts and its ongoing practice in daily life.

[3]O'Brien once suggested that it was Carleton "who really started this thing," and went on to implicate the rest of the Irish Revivalists: "They [Synge--George Moore--Gregory-Martyn and Yeats] persisted in the belief that poverty and savage existence on remote rocks was a most poetical way for people to be, provided they were other people" (Hair of the Dogma 102).

As Clissman notes, O'Brien satirized Yeats as Lionel Prune in his early writings (44).

[4]Like everything else in At Swim-Two-Birds, and reminiscent of Trellis' obsession with green as a color for books, red recurs within and without the novel. In addition to Red Flanagan, there is also "Red Kiersey" (75). The characters converge on Trellis' residence which is the "Red Swan Hotel," and, finally, the ultimate author of At Swim-Two-Birds, Flann O'Brien, is "Red" O'Brien in Gaelic (196).

[5]The way that Hanrahan achieves this curse is significant:

> When he got to his cabin there was no one there, and he went and lay down on the bed for a while as he was used to do when he wanted to make a poem or a praise or a curse. And it was not long he was in making it this time, for the power of the curse-making bards was upon him. (242)

Yeats' description of Hanrahan lying down to compose his curse refers to what David Greene describes as follows: "Another tradition which lacks absolute confirmation is that these poems were composed while the poet lay on a bed in a darkened room and were written down only when complete--perhaps only after they had been ceremonially delivered" (43). This is another element that also appears in At Swim-Two-Birds. The student narrator's retreats to his bedroom recall the tradition which is also exaggerated and repeated in the large number of beds appears in At Swim-Two-Birds.

[6]Kenner makes a comparable point about Yeats' poetry, particularly with reference to "Innisfree," at greater length and with much subtlety (A Colder Eye 50-53).

[7]In addition to Arnold's poetry, one should also include his On the Study of Celtic Literature. For an excellent discussion of its influence see Maurice Riordan. I am not arguing that comparable images could not be found in earlier Irish literature, such as Thomas Moore's "The Minstrel Boy," but a similar argument could be made regarding examples such as that poem.

[8]It is not only the image of the poet that has been invented and assimilated. A whole cluster of stereotypes has come to surround the Irish peasant. O'Brien discusses the inscription of the Irish peasant in The Hair of the Dogma (101-103), and, as Maureen Waters perceptively notes in her discussion of The Poor Mouth:

> . . . Irish peasants have been so much the subject of myth that their actual history has been obscured. O'Brien observes rather acidly that the people themselves have begun to emulate literary patterns, to act according to prescriptions set down by anthropologists, historians, folklorists, writers of fiction and poetry. (Waters 125)

Kenner provides what may be a further twist in suggesting that in his relation with Dubliners O'Brien eventually "became their creation" (A Colder Eye 257).

[9]O'Hara counts "several" Finn Mac Cools in At Swim-Two-Birds (55-61). Moreover, Finn is particularly relevant to this discussion as it is he that complains of mistreatment at the hands of authors. He characterizes himself as: "twisted and trampled and tortured for the weaving of a story-teller's book-web. Who but a book-poet would dishonour the God-big Finn for the sake of a gap-worded story?" (19).

[10]It is interesting that in The Dalkey Archive, O'Brien attributes to an elder Joyce a comparable reaction regarding Ulysses: "I have heard more than enough about that dirty book, that collection of smut, but do not be heard saying that I had anything to do with it. Faith now, you must be careful about that" (174).

[11]A number of critics offer "A Bash in the Tunnel" as evidence of O'Brien's hostility to Joyce (Waters 191). I suspect few things written by critics about Joyce would be more pleasing to him than O'Brien's description of the nameless savant's attempt to establish his reality independent of a book he had never read.

[12]Yeats, Autobiography (New York: Collier, 1965) 271. Qtd. in Kennet, A Colder Eye 8.

[13]David Powell summarizes O'Brien's assessment of Gogarty's success in responding to Joyce: "Gogarty's autobiography does nothing to diminish Joyce's stature." Powell then quotes O'Brien, "Joyce made his own personality impermeable by writing so closely about others" (54).

[14]If the implication of the title A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man were not obvious enough, Joyce also, as Kenner notes, used "Stephen Dedalus" as a pseudonym for the first stories that he published (A Colder Eye 234). Thus, "Stephen Dedalus," like Orlick Trellis and others from At Swim-Two-Birds is a character in fiction who has also written fiction of his own.

[15]A number of critics have considered this relationship. See especially Waters (95-109), and Kenner (A Colder Eye 187-191). Mercier suggests that Joyce's depiction of Gogarty as Mulligan is "realism," but the crucial point is that there is world of difference between the historical personage and the "fictional" representation, and Joyce has transmuted the former into the latter (184).

[16]It is interesting that, in addition to his autobiographies, Gogarty also attacked Joyce in the capacity of a literary critic.

[17]A strikingly similar expression occurs in Stanislaus Joyce's Dublin Diary: "I would like to be revenged on my country for giving me the character I have" (33).

[18]The identification is made more clearly in O'Brien's essay on Joyce, "A Bash in the Tunnel," about which O'Brien writes: "A better title of this piece might be: Was Joyce Mad? by Hamlet, Prince of Denmark" (201).

[19]See, for example, Gilbert Sorrentino 147; J. C. Mays, "Brian O'Nolan and Joyce on Art and on Life" 240; Bernard Benstock, "A Flann for All Seasons" 23.

[20]Joseph Browne has produced an especially felicitous image: "the critical tendency has . . . overemphasized the Joycean presence, thereby creating a Procrustean Bed on which to strap and then misdiagnose the O'Brien corpus" (154).

[21]Waters writes, "while Joyce satirized the leaders of Revival in order to define his own position, O'Brien satirized Joyce for much the same reason" (123). While areeing with Waters, I would suggest that O'Brien's engagement with Joyce is not only satiric.

[22]Some critics have explored this aspect of O'Brien's writing, but have suggested that this engagement represents a flaw in the writer. J. C. C. Mays, in "Brian O'Nolan and Joyce on Art and on Life," writes that O'Brien takes "art as life and treat[s] the literary literarily" (244). He concludes that O'Brien's "writing is not concerned with this [refering to Joyce] rapprochement with life" (255). I would suggest that O'Brien is concerned with the encroachment of literature on life, or, more generally, the implications of each for the other. See also Mays, "Brian O'Nolan: literalist of the Imagination."

[23]In more general terms, At Swim-Two-Birds can be seen as a revolutionary text in the sense suggested by Linda Hutcheon's paraphrase of Laurent Jenny:

> [T]he role of self-consciously revolutionary texts is to rework those discourses whose weight has become tyrannical. This is not imitation; it is not a monologic mastery of another's discourse. It is a dialogic, parodic reappropriation of the past. (A Theory of Parody 72)

[24]J. C. C Mays suggests a link with Joyce in Trellis' name. Mays connects the name with Joyce's comment to Padraig Colum, "Of course, I don't take Vico's speculations literally; I use his cycles as a trellis" (Mary and Padraic Colum, Our Friend James Joyce (London: Heinemann, 1959) 123. Qtd. in "Brian O'Nolan: Literalist of the Imagination" 106; however Peter Costello and Peter Van De Kamp suggest that the name derives from the fact that At Swim-Two-Birds was written on a table that was built out of a trellis (61).

[25]Another Joycean link is suggested by Joseph Conte, who connects At Swim-Two-Birds with Joyce's "sea-blue book" (133).

[26]Where O'Brien suggests that the novelist is the child of rape, Hutcheon makes exactly that suggestion about the novel itself (Narcissistic Narrative 9).

[27]There is an obvious and important connection between the issue discussed here and the one mentioned by the Good Fairy. The fact that the opposition of "fiction" to "reality" in the one becomes "spirit" to "flesh" in the other is worth noting:

> [A]ngelic or spiritual carnality is not easy and in any case the offspring would be severely handicapped by being half flesh and half spirit, a very baffling and neutralizing assortment of fractions since the two elements are forever at variance. (106)

[28]This point is one which is generally obvious to Joyce commentators, but has received relatively little attention with reference to O'Brien. Clissmann writes of the narrator of At Swim-Two-Birds:

> His perception of the world, his vision of reality is, then, composed of his awareness of the factual details of his own everyday existence, the constituent characteristics of his fantasy world, and his very 'literary' mind. He tends to translate events into literary clichés, to see things in terms of a previous literary style, and then, almost unconsciously, to parody that style and place it in immediate juxtaposition to another parodied style. (88)

Clissmann is perceptive, but does not seem to see the possibility that literariness may permeate beyond the narrator's mind. I would suggest that O'Brien indicates how the narrator is characterized by a particular style (a style which involves parodies of other styles comparable to the depiction of Stephen Dedalus). However, this conventional practice of representation is called into question by incidents such as the characterization of Shanahan by one style by Trellis, by a completely different and irreconcilable style by Orlick, and Shanahan's brief turn as an author in which he produces versions of the Pooka and of Trellis in a style similar to the one used to depict himself. O'Brien implies Bakhtin's insight that "[e]ven the language of the novelist is professional jargon" ("Discourse" 289).

[29]Like Trellis, the narrator is depicted in terms that make his sexual inadequacy obvious, and also link him to the young Stephen Dedalus, the obvious example being the walks with Kelly which are described as: "Purpose of walk: Discovery and embracing of virgins" (48).

[30]It should also be added that his target was not necessarily Joyce as a historical person, but the construction created by the literary critics, as O'Brien makes clear in a letter related to The Dalkey Archive:

> My target here is not even crudely defined. The intention here is not to make Joyce himself ridiculous but to say something funny about the preposterous image of him that emerges from the treatment he has received at the hands of many commentators and exegetists (mostly, alas, American) ("A Sheaf of Letters" 86).

In this sense he describes the University of Harvard as "famed inventors of James A. Joyce," (Hair of the Dogma 107) and even asked "did. . . James Joyce ever exist?" ("J-Day" 16). However, it should also be remembered that he also asserted that Joyce and Yeats were (in Powell's paraphrase) "the only two Irish literary figures of the last century who were men of genius." Powell quotes O'Brien as claiming that the rest were "literary vermin, or eruptions of literary scabies" (52).

[31]The "poor German" suggests the artist figure, and, specifically, the narrator. The German's obsession with the number three points back to the narrator's three openings, and even the first line of the text: "Having placed in my mouth sufficient bread for three minutes' chewing. . ." (1). The identification is made stronger by a comparison with O'Brien's juvenile "Scenes in a Novel" which is written from the point of view of an author whose characters are in revolt against. The novelist (who is much like Trellis) is convinced that they will murder him. He writes "Posterity is taking a hand in the destiny of its ancestors," and the piece concludes with the author writing "Adieu!" (18)

[32]While I am not convinced that the images mock all of art, I would certainly agree with Waters that they seem aimed at the variety of artist that Italo Calvino praises Georges Perec for being:

> In order to escape the arbitrary nature of existence, Perec, like his protagonist, is forced to impose rigorous rules and regulations on himself, even if these rules are in turn arbitrary. But the miracle is that this system of poetics, which might seem artificial and mechanical, produces inexhaustible freedom and wealth of invention. (Six Memos for the Next Millennium 122)

Miles Orvell takes what may be an intermediate position:

> It [the ending] is not, perhaps, as gratuitously grim a conclusion as may seem at first, for the novel has balanced uneasily between order and chaos, between control and impulse, and this last image suggests that even self-destruction can be encompassed by controlling structures and made an orderly and in some way satisfying act--for a madman. ("Entirely Fictitious: The Fiction of Flann O'Brien" 98)

[33]Richard F. Peterson suggests that "At Swim-Two-Birds mocks the novel as autobiography, epic, dream, and even revenge-book. It also pokes fun at the idea of the writer as the Artist-God who is his own father and his own son and at the belief in the power of the imagination to create a world unto itself. By the novel's end, poor

Dermot Trellis, the epitome of the writer who lives entirely within the world of his imagination, has his powers entirely usurped by his characters" (343).

[34]This and similar notions remain unpopular in certain circles. Kenner (who is by any standard an exceptionally perceptive critic) launches an attack on French post-structuralist theory in the following terms:

> Though at present they shy away from close engagement, post-structuralists point to Joyce as a prime exhibit. Does not Ulysses itself enact the gradual encroachment of "textuality" upon representational narrative?
>
> . . .
>
> But by post-structuralist theory all books end to end are pure text, notably Ulysses, which however remains haunted by Leopold Bloom's remarkably substantial ghost, moving through a certain city in a certain year. Though the city in the book is a city of works, it corresponds so minutely to a city in Ireland that facts drawn from that ~~city~~ dovetail into the book even when the book does not mention them. (A Colder Eye 228)

He goes on to mention the appearance in Ulysses of a "stimulus outside the text, the response inside it," and challenges the "prophets of bare textuality" to explain it if they can (228). Kenner's challenge is undermined by the fact that the "stimulus outside the text" that he describes is a newspaper which is, indeed, precisely the sort of "exterior" text that Hutcheon suggests that Kristeva is describing (elsewhere Kristeva describes the "general text" as "culture"). For whatever reason of his own, Kenner does not entertain the possibility of an expanded notion of textuality which is capable of including documents regarding Dublin and even the common knowledge of Dubliners within the boundaries of textuality.

Kenner is not alone. John Hall suggests that Kristeva's notion of intertextuality "argues simply that literature is best read as a comment on other texts, rather than on society" (The Sociology of Literature (London: Longman, 1979) 16. Qtd. in Orr 81).

[35]It is also interesting that in the persona of Myles na Gopaleen, he took Dion Boucicault's prototypical stage Irishman of the same name, and re-cast that character until it represented an almost infinite variety of identities.

[36]O'Brien's attitude towards the implications of Finnegans Wake as an endless book are made plain in The Third Policeman, which also returns to its beginning, but is a vision of hell. As far as the Joyce industry goes, O'Brien returned to that issue again and again. I have quoted above a few of his attacks but here I will quote him once more: "Joyce is not living--though that indeed were a minor accomplishment on the part of one who reduced the entire literary

world to a state of chronic and helpless exegesis." (Qtd. in Powell 53)

[37]John Wain suggests that "Teresa is Ireland, in much the same way that the old woman who brings milk to the tower in the opening section of Ulysses is Ireland" which seems an intriguing if not explicit identification (81).

[38]As Clissmann notes, it may also represent a response to an article by O'Brien's friend Niall Sheridan in which he argues that in twentieth century novel-writing "the advance has been towards a better and more convincing realism." Clissman's argument is strongly supported by the appearance in Sheridan's essay of the Latin proverb, "ars est celare artem", that Trellis utters in the penultimate conclusion of At Swim-Two-Birds (Clissman 96; At Swim-Two-Birds 216).

[39]O'Brien can thus be seen to be revising the image of the Artist set forth in Portrait and setting in its place a model which has more in common with Kristeva's definition of "Bakhtinian dialogism," which, she suggests, "identifies writing as both subjectivity and communication, or better, as intertextuality" (Desire 68).

[40] Nomi Tamir-Ghez suggests a useful vocabulary in his argument that any literary text creates an "Internal F[ield of] R[eference] (IFR)" within which literary statements can be said to be "true" (qtd. in Orr). In these terms, it can be seen that At Swim-Two-Birds creates a number of Internal Fields of Reference. In this way, the novel mirrors the world of which it is a part, which is also made up of a multiplicity of Internal Fields of Reference within literature, discursive practice, and the general text (culture). This terminology is clearly akin to, and, possibly drawn from Kristeva's distinction between the "extra-novelistic set" or "Te," and the "novelistic set" or "Tn" (Desire 37). My reason for citing Tamir-Ghez is that I would suggest that a novel may have more than a single "Internal Field of Reference," or, in Kristeva's terms, a multiple number of "Tns" which, perhaps, could be designated "Tn^1," "Tn^2," etc. On the whole, I think Tamir-Ghez' term a little more clear and less awkward.

[41]James Joyce, qtd. in Richard Ellmann 410, also qtd. in Hutcheon, Narcissistic Narratives (99). Critics such as André Topia in "The matrix and the echo: Intertextuality in Ulysses" argue for Ulysses precisely what I am articulating as the difference between it and At Swim-Two-Birds. Comments such as this one of Joyce's as well as some of Stephen's beliefs regarding art and initial critical reactions to Joyce's work suggest to me that we may have been taught how to read Joyce in part through the intervention of later writers such as O'Brien.

CHAPTER THREE

Constructing Worlds: Readers and Authors in At Swim-Two-Birds

The previous chapter described the worlds of writers writing, sometimes writing against each other, but always writing in the context of each other's writing. However, my discussion of the relation of author(s) to text(s) has obviously ignored the role of the readers. This chapter will address the implications of reading, readers, and the readers' near relations, the critics, in the textual world(s) of At Swim-Two-Birds.

The young German's suicide note is the last scrap of "found" text included in At Swim-Two-Birds. It echoes the three endings and three beginnings, and it may suggest the death of the student narrator who is the primary internal author in and of At Swim-Two-Birds. Of course, when a novel ends with "good-bye, good-bye, good-bye," whatever the context, the meaning of the words is inevitably doubled so that the author and the novel are bidding readers "good-bye." This is a generous gesture, as well as one that anticipates contemporary theories regarding the death of the author. By the end of At Swim-Two-Birds, readers have been provided with a context within which to understand the novel's gruesome ending of a bloody "good-bye" in triplicate on a picture.

At Swim-Two-Birds concludes with the closure of death, and thus invokes a finality that goes beyond art, although linked with art inasmuch as the German's three good-byes recall the narrator's

obsession with three, and the beginning of the book. However, At Swim-Two-Birds suggests with equal force a radically different closure (or non-closure), in the way in which its end returns to its beginning as does Joyce's novel of the same year, Finnegans Wake. Yet At Swim-Two-Birds is unlike Finnegans Wake insofar as the end of the former does not return to its own beginning on the same discursive level but rather has shifted levels and initiated its own metatext.[1] Thus, the novel's end can be seen to have the same relation to its beginning that literary criticism has to its object. The end of At Swim-Two-Birds may be understood as an encoded reading of itself, or, in other words, as the beginning of critical commentary on the novel.

A concern with the reading of At Swim-Two-Birds and with reading in general is a significant part of the novel. At Swim-Two-Birds includes both a wide variety of authors, and, equally importantly, a wide variety of readers. The readings of various readers are encoded in the novel in a number of ways. In some cases an account of a character's reaction to a literary production is simply given (as, for example, with the individuals with whom the narrator shares his "spare time literary activities"). In other cases, a character's way of reading is revealed when that character attempts to become a writer, and the reader is at times treated to the opinions on literary issues of the various characters and authors in the novel. At Swim-Two-Birds is thus not only intensely concerned with the construction of texts (including itself); the novel also queries the reception of texts (including itself). An exploration of reading is central to At Swim-Two-Birds. This chapter addresses both the readings in the text and

the reading of the text and the mirroring process by which each reveals something about the other.

Readers encountering At Swim-Two-Birds for the first time may be perplexed by the title, but will most likely be reassured by the appearance of conventional novelistic devices.[2] Before beginning, most readers will probably notice the epigram from the Greek which both occults (if the reader is unfamiliar with Greek) and promises some key to what will follow. The novel proper begins under the conventional heading "CHAPTER 1" (and will continue for 164 pages, at which point the heading "Chapter One" will reappear). Readers also encounter the "I" who introduces his "spare-time literary activities": "A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings" (1). What follows are, of course, three openings, neatly labeled as such, and readers, in trying to find some connection between the three, are embarked on what Umberto Eco terms an "inferential walk" (The Role of the Reader 31). The inter-relation exists outside the author's prescience, but is not available on first reading.

From the beginning, then, the student author and his readers are concerned with the same problem, namely, the relation of the three openings to each other and to the novel as a whole. The student (in whose prescience, presumably, the openings are inter-related) apparently has the superior knowledge and challenges readers on that basis. However, the student narrator's own limitations appear as he is recalled to the perception of his surroundings. This transition is important because the novel has begun with considerable sign-posting;

a narrative frame has been set up and within that frame three narratives have begun. The clear demarcation creates the expectation that boundaries between the "real" and the "fictional" will be well maintained. Readers are confronted with the transition from the description of Finn's backside which "was large enough to halt the march of men through a mountain-pass" to "I hurt a tooth in the corner of my jaw with a lump of the crust I was eating. This recalled me to the perception of my surroundings" (10). One reading might be that "reality" has invaded "art". However, it would be more accurate to suggest that one level of discourse has contaminated another, or that the narrative frame that has been established has been transgressed.

Immediately following this passage, the student narrator is asked, "Tell me this, do you ever open a book at all?" (10) This question occurs at the moment that he is opening (or beginning) what appears to be "his" book, and, at the very moment that the reader has also opened what appears to be the student narrator's book. For the reader of At Swim-Two-Birds, the meaning of the word "you" in the Uncle's question is doubled, and the reader is included as well as the student. The effect is comic; however, by drawing attention to the materiality of the text, the question also foregrounds the role of the reader. In this way, the uncle's question can be seen as being essentially similiar to a wide variety of other unusual textual practices including italicized section headings, the occasional "synops[es] for the benefit of new readers", and the use of exact rhetorical terms for figures of speech.

The effect of the attention that is paid to the reader's role is comic and also has the effect of distancing readers by creating self-

consciousness about the act of reading. This focus also suggests the importance of paying attention to the experience of reading this text. O'Brien was well aware of the difficulties that At Swim-Two-Birds presented to readers, and commented that At Swim-Two-Birds was "harder on the head than the worst whiskey" ("A Sheaf of Letters" 69). He also noted (with some irony) that Joyce made a similar point: "he [Joyce] complained that I did not give the reader much of a chance, 'Finnegans Wake' in his hand as he spoke" ("A Sheaf of Letters" 68).

At Swim-Two-Birds is bewildering for a number of reasons, almost all of which have to do with the variety of ways in which the text systematically sabotages the familiar certainties of reading. Perhaps the most disconcerting aspect of the novel is the way in which the readerly experience of watching a story unfold (with a few authorial intrusions) gives way to a process in which a proliferation of authors and textes trouvés leaves readers unable to determine who has authored what and, consequently, what meaning to assign to anything. The situation confronting the reader is one extremely difficult of critical rendition or description. Most critics have dealt with this difficulty by summarizing the book, and allowing the summary to suggest some of the book's complexities. To avoid repeating that strategy, I will briefly borrow some of the terms used by Gérard Genette to attempt to describe as precisely as possible the labyrinth entered by readers of At Swim-Two-Birds.

Genette introduces a number of terms to describe the relation of different levels of narration to each other. Three of his key terms, "diegetic," "metadiegetic," and "extradiegetic," are described in the following:

> We will define this difference in level by saying that any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed. M. de Renoncourt's writing of his fictive Mémoires is a (literary) act carried out at a first level, which we will call extradiegetic; the events told in those Mémoires (including Des Grieux's narrating act) are inside this first narrative, so we will describe them as diegetic, or intradiegetic; the events told in Des Grieux's narrative, a narrative in the second degree, we will call metadiegetic. (228)

The crucial point concerning all these terms is that they "designate, not individuals, but relative situations and functions" (229). In the case of At Swim-Two-Birds, since "[t]he narrating instance of a first narrative is . . . extradiegetic by definition," we would label the nameless student's writing of his manuscripts, both literary and biographical, extradiegetic (229). The anonymous narrator's writing is an act that is carried out at the first level and is extradiegetical. What the narrator describes in his "Biographical reminiscences" contains both that narrating act, as well as the act that produces his "spare-time literary activities." However, because the "spare-time literary activities" are contained by the "Biographical reminiscences," the latter is diegetic (or intradiegetic) and the former is metadiegetic since it occurs as a narrative in the second degree. To carry these terms one step further, since the narrating act that produces Trellis' manuscript occurs in what is the metadiegetic level (in relation to the "Biographical reminiscences"), Trellis' narrative would be termed meta-metadiegesis.

Readers are already conditioned to perceive characters' descriptions of their imaginative lives as occurring on a level other

than their descriptions of their "real" lives. The vocabulary developed by Genette provides terms in which to discuss these distinctions and their disruptions. The final term that I will borrow is metalepsis, which Genette describes in the following:

> The transition from one narrative level to another can in principle be achieved only by the narrating, the act that consists precisely of introducing into one situation, by means of a discourse, the knowledge of another situation. Any other form of transit is, if not always impossible, at any rate always transgressive. Cortazar tells the story of a man assassinated by one of the characters in the novel he is reading. . . . (234)

Genette's conclusions have obvious applicability to At Swim-Two-Birds: "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse (as in Cortazar), produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical (when, as in Sterne or Diderot, it is presented in a joking tone) or fantastic" (234-35). Like Pirandello's plays, O'Brien's novel can be described as "a vast expansion of metalepsis" (235).[3] Christine Brooke-Rose uses these terms to discuss some of the problems presented by At Swim-Two-Birds:

> What we have, then [in At Swim-Two-Birds], is constant and deliberate transgression of diegetic levels--a procedure not in itself new, but so complicated, with so many levels (stories within stories and transgressions of narrators from one level to another) that it would be almost impossible to follow if the procedure itself as part of a symbolic code supercoded, were not thoroughly overdetermined. (Brooke-Rose 132-33)

Brooke-Rose is describing, in short hand, the difficulties that confront readers of At Swim-Two-Birds. Her argument can be clarified by some examples. To begin with, it should be noted that the student

narrator's theory that characters can be borrowed and can appear in a number of works written by different authors explicitly denies the importance of the narrative frame. The narrator's theory posits an essential and unchanging identity for a character. However, the novel both utilizes and undermines this notion at every turn. Thus, Finn Mac Cool appears in the "third opening." At that point there is little or nothing to indicate to readers what context the openings occupy. It may be that the three openings constitute the work of the previously introduced narrator; however, it is just as possible that the narrator has borrowed the openings from other works as examples of "good openings" to support the initial argument. In fact, given the nature of both the content of the third opening and its distinctive style, this last possibility actually seems more likely. Of course, by the end of the passage when the narrator is abruptly recalled to his surroundings, we realize that the passage occurs within his own head. However, later the narrator will write "After an interval Finn Mac Cool, a hero of old Ireland, came out before me from his shadow," thus suggesting the independence of Finn from the narrator's imagination. The notion that the character Finn has his own independent existence is particularly powerful because, of course, he does. Finn exists in a wide variety of manuscripts and, until recently, also survived in the oral tradition. Thus, readers must negotiate both an understanding of Finn as a character that they have encountered elsewhere and also as a creation of the idiosyncratic narrator of At Swim-Two-Birds.

Although this situation has its complexities, it quickly becomes more complicated. As Brooke-Rose points out, Trellis is later said to

have created Finn (Brooke-Rose 133). Yet readers are very likely to recognize Finn from other sources, and, in any event, they have by this point in the novel already encountered him in the student's writing. There are points of connection between the two Finns, the most important being the style used to present Finn's speech. However, the narrator's Finn and Trellis' Finn, despite sharing a name and a few traits, are either distinctly different characters, or, possibly, the same character at different ages. The former is young and excessively virile, the latter, old and infirm, and whereas the narrator's Finn refuses to relate any tales at all, Trellis' Finn will not cease from relating.[4] Readers are presented with the older Finn as a product of Trellis' imagination and the younger Finn as a "borrowed" independent character.

This situation suggests a number of possibilities. The first is that the narrator is right, and that a character like Finn has a certain essential identity which will appear wherever he is invoked (or allowed to appear). The possibility that Trellis is lying to conceal his own theft makes a certain amount of sense, given that Trellis will be put on trial for literary offenses including plagiarism, but that same possibility also raises a host of other complexities. If Trellis appears as a character in the narrator's writing in much the same way that Finn does, then Trellis, too, is presumably independent. However, Dermot Trellis, along with a host of his characters, is subordinated by Orlick Trellis, and Dermot experiences having words put into his mouth by another author. This last turn of the screw suggests that the narrator's theory is not correct, and that in attempting to create Trellis as an ostensibly

independent author, the narrator has simply succeeded in creating a mouth-piece who will merely tell the narrator's tale.

Finn is also an author, but it remains impossible to determine whether he is either a mouth-piece or an independent entity. Finn does "escape" from Trellis' control, but readers can never resolve whether that escape proves the independence of the creation from the creator (i.e. Finn from Trellis), or whether it proves the greater control of the writer once removed (i.e. the student narrator). The problematic conclusion does nothing to remedy this confusion, as it discusses Trellis' psyche, which would seem to suggest a certain independence, but discusses it in the context of Hamlet, a fictional character.

It makes a certain amount of sense to follow our consideration of Finn by looking at Sweeny, who first appears as a character in a tale told by Finn, and thus clearly occupies a metadiegetic level in relation to Finn.[5] However, shortly after readers encounter Sweeny as a character in Finn's tale, the unconscious Sweeny is encountered by the group on its way to the wedding party. Sweeny thus traverses diegetic levels and arrives in the same level as his teller. As a character he seems indistinguishable, whether in metadiegetic relation to Finn or in diegetic relation to Finn. Within the frame of Finn's tale, Sweeny is convincingly depicted as a product and inhabitant of medieval Ireland (which is clear whether or not one knows that O'Brien is translating Middle Irish texts).

When he is first encountered by the party led by the Pooka and the Good Fairy, Sweeny appears exactly as he does in Finn's telling. However, that perception of Sweeny is soon disrupted. As the party

has arrived early, a round of poker is suggested, and members of the party discuss among themselves who will play:

> I have the cards in my hand, said Shorty, gather in closer, my arm isn't a yard long. How many hands now? Is Sweeny playing, asked Casey, are you, Sweeny? Have you any money, Sweeny? asked Slug. (198)

All of which seems farcical given the apparent fact that Sweeny can be safely assumed to be unfamiliar with poker as he is straight out of medieval Ireland, is nearly unconscious, and is mad. Sweeny answers in his characteristic idiom:

> Mad Sweeny was sprawled on a chair in an attitude of inadvertence, idly plucking the blood-stiffened lichen from the gash in his nipple with an idle finger. His eyelids fluttered as he addressed himself to the utterance of this stave.
>
> They have passed below me in their course, the stags across Ben Boirche, their antlers tear the sky, I will take a hand. (198-99)

The transgression embodied in the last five words is enormous. Sweeny has appeared to be a clearly defined character with an historically limited quotient of knowledge and experience. Here, he suddenly possesses the requisite knowledge for discussing and playing poker, which seems incompatible with his earlier incarnation in the story told by Finn.

Sweeny's role in At Swim-Two-Birds is even more complex. Just as the character of Finn has intertextual resonances with the Irish tradition, so has Sweeny; however, both characters have further resonances with their incarnations in the works of Joyce and Eliot, both of whom are named in At Swim-Two-Birds. Finn Mac Cool recalls Joyce's parody of the "heroic" style adopted by nineteenth-century re-

tellers of the Finn tale, and Sweeny recalls Eliot's poems "Sweeney Erect," and "Sweeney Among the Nightingales." Thus, Trellis as a plagiarist is linked with the great modernist writers, and in a more understated irony, the Good Fairy expresses his unexpected admiration for Eliot, and immediately after doing so, meets, and does not like, one of the subjects of Eliot's poetry.

The Good Fairy's incursion into literary criticism is itself an intriguing disruption. A character named "the Good Fairy" might be expected in a didactic children's story; however, in such a context, few readers would expect an opinion on Eliot. The Good Fairy's role is at once transgressive and illuminative. The Good Fairy is, after all, a relatively educated individual (beyond the third book in school, anyway) who offers a variety of received opinions (122). Upon learning that Jem Casey is a poet, the Good Fairy remarks:

> Poetry is a thing I am very fond of, said the Good Fairy. I always make a point of following the works of Mr. Eliot and Mr. Lewis and Mr. Devlin. A good pome is a tonic. Was your pome on the subject of flowers, Mr. Casey? Wordsworth was a great man for flowers. (120)

While there is a certain glibness that likely alienates most readers from the Good Fairy, nevertheless, the literary opinions held by that unusual entity appear conventional enough. However, it quickly becomes apparent that, as usual, more is involved. Slug points out that "Mr. Casey doesn't go in for that class of stuff," and, after a few more tangential remarks, is seconded by Casey himself:

> The stuff that I go in for, said Casey roughly, is the real stuff. Oh, none of the fancy stuff for me.
> He spat phlegm coarsely on the grass.
> The workin' man doesn't matter, of course, he added.
> But why? asked the Pooka courteously. He is surely

> the noblest of creatures.
>
> What about all these strikes? asked the Good Fairy. I don't know about him being the noblest. They have the country crippled with their strikes. Look at the price of bread. Sixpence halfpenny for a two-pound loaf. (120)

The Good Fairy continues:

> And look at bacon, said the Good Fairy. One and ninepence if you please.
>
> To hell with the workin' man, said Casey. That's what you hear. To bloody hell with him.
>
> I have a great admiration for the worker, said the Pooka.
>
> Well so have I, said Casey loudly. I'll always stand up for my own. It's about the Workin' Man that I was reciting my pome.
>
> And then you have the Conditions of Employment Act, said the Good Fairy, class legislation, that's what it is. Holidays with full pay if you please. No wonder the moneyed classes are leaving the country. Bolshevism will be the next step.
>
> I admire the working man immensely, said the Pooka, and I will not hear a word against him. He is the backbone of family life.
>
> I'd advise that man in the pocket to keep his mouth shut, said Casey roughly. He wouldn't be the first of his kind that got a hammering. (120-21)

One feature of this passage, encountered throughout the novel, is the way in which a a speaker does not reply to whoever has just spoken, but is continuing either an earlier conversation or a monologue. The Good Fairy gets started on the subject of the "workin' man," and continues oblivious to the fact that Casey is antagonistic, and the Pooka, for whatever reasons of his own, is siding with Casey. Of course, the Pooka's words look rather empty, particularly when he asserts that he "will not hear a word against him [i.e. 'the workin' man']" just as the Good Fairy is in the middle of an anti-trade union tirade. Similarly all of Casey's words, like his poetry, seem

mechanically generated, and, like his threat to the Good Fairy, do not promise much in the way of action.

This would seem to take us some distance from the question of characters as literary critics, but despite their apparent differences, Casey, the Good Fairy and the Pooka are linked in their use of language. They, like virtually every other character in the book, use language for a wide variety of purposes with the possible exception of communication. Thus, when Casey's "pome" has been heard, the Good Fairy points out: "That is what they call a ballad, observed the Good Fairy. Did you ever read the Ballad of Father Gilligan? he asked the Pooka." The point of the Good Fairy's demonstration of his taxonomic expertise and of his allusion to one of Yeats' less fortunate efforts is not to communicate anything except his own erudition which is, in turn, undercut by his remark that "Father Gilligan" is "a very nice spiritual thing" (173).

In ironic counterpoint to the Good Fairy's evident desire to set a high tone for art, there is Shanahan, who in addition to asserting Casey's primacy in any contest of both pick and poetry, also explains why the sort of "tack" offered by Finn has gone out of style:

> You can't beat it, of course, said Shanahan with a reddening of the features, the real old stuff of the native land, you know, stuff, that brought scholars to our shore when your men on the other side were on the flat of their bellies before the calf of gold with a sheepskin around their man. It's the stuff that put our country where she stands to-day, Mr. Furriskey, and I'd have my tongue out of my head by the bloody roots before I'd be heard saying a word against it. But the man in the street, where does he come in? By God he doesn't come it at all as far as I can see. (75)

Of course, Shanahan's refusal to hear a word against "it" is ironically undermined by his own inability to listen to "it." His concern for "the man in the street" will resurface later in the context of his critique of Orlick's writing:

> There's this, too, said Shanahan with a quick continuance of his argument, there's this, that you have to remember the man in the street. I may understand you, Mr. Furriskey may understand you--but the man in the street? Oh, by God you have to go very very slow if you want him to follow you. A snail would be too fast for him, a snail could give him yards. (169)

Shanahan's use of "the man in the street" is comic because of the obvious way in which Shanahan attributes his own limitations to the "man on the street," who serves as a hypothetical reader, or, perhaps more accurately, a hypothetical misreader. Of course, if the "man on the street" is a misreader, then the same can be said of his creator, Shanahan, and the Good Fairy as well.

In the literary critical attempts of both the Good Fairy and Shanahan, there is a curious hollowness which is by no means confined to them, but can be found in virtually every attempt made by characters to comment on literature (as nearly every character does). One of the earliest attempts is made by Brinsley in response to a question from the narrator regarding "that stuff about Finn," "Oh, yes, he said, that was the pig's whiskers. That was funny all right" (24).[6] Later attempts do not seem any more successful. After being read an extract, Micheal Byrne comments, "You will have to show me this thing, . . . it involves several planes and dimensions. You have read Shutzmeyer's book, of course?" (101) Thus, as readers and critics struggle to come to an understanding of At Swim-Two-Birds,

they are faced by the daunting example of all the critics within the novel who fail so disastrously.

Christine Brooke-Rose analyzes the novel in terms of an "encoded reader." However, she ends her essay by suggesting that she has, in a manner suggested by At Swim-Two-Birds, employed a reader who may in turn be one of her own fictions (148). It is not difficult to understand why a consideration of a work like At Swim-Two-Birds would lead to such hedging. Readers who witness almost endless misreadings are very likely to mistrust their own readings. Madeleine Sorapure detects a similar strategy in Italo Calvino's If On a Winter's Night: "The fact that Calvino includes so many misreaders in his novel, clearly indicates that he does not confer an absolute authority on the reader" (Sorapure 705). At Swim-Two-Birds gives readers neither complete interpretive freedom nor the security of a firm authorial presence to anchor meaning. Instead, a more egalitarian delegation of work appears in which the dichotomous roles of reader and writer are blurred in a variety of ways.

In At Swim-Two-Birds authors are encountered as readers, the most obvious example being the student author's inclusion of material that he reads into the text that he writes. The presence of the student narrator's reading is evident as both direct quotation and, less obviously, in his acknowledgement of literary influences such as Joyce and Huxley. Many critics have suggested that the segments of At Swim-Two-Birds in which the narrator describes his life at college recall both in style and content Joyce's early work. This similarity is curious given how abreviated O'Brien's treatment of the college is in comparison with Joyce's, but, the important point is that, just as

the narrator's theory suggests, he need not evoke University College in its fullness, but need only allude to another author who has already done so. The same process occurs intratextually when Shanahan and his friends take up Orlick's story about Trellis:

> The two lads in the air came to a sudden stop by order of his Satanic Majesty. The Pooka himself stopped where he was, never mind how it was done. The other fell down about a half a mile to the ground on the top of his snot and broke his two legs in halves and fractured his fourteen ribs, a terrible fall altogether. Down flew the Pooka after a while with a pipe in his mouth and the full of a book of fancy talk out of him as if this was any consolation to our friend, who was pumping blood like a stuck pig and roaring out strings of profanity and dirty foul language, enough to make the sun set before the day was half over.
>
> Enough of that, my man, says the Pooka taking the pipe from his mouth. Enough of your dirty tongue now, Caesar. Say you like it. (181)

Shanahan's style is completely unlike Orlick's relatively polished account of the horrors inflicted on Trellis. The Pooka has been characterized by a particularly urbane speech to which Shanahan can only allude ("the full of a book of fancy talk"). Nevertheless, because the readers are already familiar with Orlick's carefully written account, the continuity of names that persists, despite a complete change in narrative style and character speech patterns, means that readers will attach what they know from Orlick's account to that provided by the cowboys. The situation that results exemplifies the narrator's theories.

This point in the text is also significant because Shanahan writes in his own distinctive vernacular; throughout the novel the descriptive passages have tended to occur in more standard English, and Shanahan and his friends have spoken their own curious dialect of

cowboy slang crossed with Dublinese. Once Shanahan takes over the narration, his ideolect usurps the privilege usually accorded to standard English. Up to this point, the Dublin cowboy vernacular has only been used to characterize the Dublin cowboys. In a sense, they have been their speech, and their speech has been presented as being highly derivative. More generally, one might suggest that At Swim-Two-Birds inscribes a complex version of "le style est l'homme," in which the styles that make up the various characters are derived from reading, either the character's or the author's. However, even as this notion is suggested, it is called into question, so that Shanahan succeeds in describing both the Pooka and Trellis in a style that is completely removed from that used by either the student narrator or Orlick, and has placed in the mouth of the Pooka speeches that bear no similarity to the usually urbane speeches of the Pooka.

To return to the role played by styles in the construction of character, it is obvious that the styles employed by the narrator are derived from his reading, often word for word. His inclusion of direct quotation from a wide variety of sources exemplifies his theory that modern literature is an extended project of plagiarism and creates an even greater multiplication of authors than provided for by the formal devices of the plot. Earlier I suggested the impossibility of determining the number of Cuchulains, and, in a like fashion, in the world of At Swim-Two-Birds the number of authors is also indeterminable. To cite a brief example that occurs before first-time readers can have the faintest inkling of what is involved, I will consider the earliest extract from the trial of Dermot Trellis:

> Did you write the following: Sir Francis Thumb Drake, comma, with three inquiring midshipmen and a cabin boy, comma, he dispatched in a wrinkled Mayflower across the seas of his Braille face?
>
> I did.
>
> I put it to you that the passage was written by Mr. Tracy and that you stole it. (42)

Trellis is on trial for plagiarism. However, the trial is being scripted by his vengeful son. The reader confronts a variety of possibilities: 1) Trellis did steal the passage, and Tracy is the "real author"; 2) Trellis did write the passage and the charge is a fabrication of his son; 3) Trellis never wrote it at all, the whole thing is a fabrication of Orlick's (who would then be the author); 4) the passage occurs in the narrator's book; he is the author of it; 5) some one else has seized control of the manuscript at this point; and so on. It is, of course, particularly ludicrous that anyone would argue over such a badly written scrap of text.

The trial passage also alludes to another writer, William Tracy, of whom readers might expect to have heard in the same way that they have heard of other writers mentioned such as Joyce and Eliot. To my knowledge, no one has located the works of William Tracy, but as with numerous other unlikely texts mentioned in At Swim-Two-Birds, critics are searching diligently for his writing. The Athenian Oracle has been found but Conspectus of the Arts has not.[7] Something sublimely ridiculous occurs when readers cannot tell whether something is a quotation or a parody. Style is usually read as the mark of the author and a signal of the originality of the writing; however, when styles are multiplied and juxtaposed, and when it is also clear that style can just as easily be the mark of a forgery, then the

relationship of style to authority becomes unsettled. The scraps of text become that oddity, unauthorized writing.

The proliferation of authors confronts readers with a web of magnificent complexity. Virtually all the characters assume the exalted status of the author at some time within At Swim-Two-Birds; in so doing, they deflate the notion of the author as the godlike creator, because the interconnections that are established between all the characters as writers (connections that extend beyond the boundaries of the book) defeat the possibility of any of the authors' appearing original, or "creative," in sense of being engaged in an activity analogous to that of the "creator." In his newspaper writing as Myles na Gopaleen, O'Brien claimed that his "sole contribution to the terrestrial literatures has been to refute each and every claim to originality on the part of other writers" (Qtd. in Powell 58-59).

I have already explored the link between Sweeny and Finn. Orlick too is linked to Finn inasmuch as Orlick retells the story of Sweeny in order to be revenged on his father (which also links Trellis and Sweeny).[8] Orlick is also linked by profession and paternity with his father, Dermot Trellis.[9] The Oedipal struggle enacted between the two connects them with the narrator and his uncle, but the narrator is also linked with Trellis, as J.M. Silverthorne points out: "Despite his professed belief in freedom for his characters, the student narrator organizes their behavior so totally for his own purposes that his identification with Trellis is unavoidable" (79). Of course, the narrator is linked with Trellis in a number of other ways: two that are connected are the great love they share for their respective beds and the apparent infliction of lice upon Trellis shortly after the

narrator discovers them on himself.[10] Trellis is obviously connected to Tracy, the other writer of pulp westerns; in fact, Trellis is charged with re-telling some of Tracy's stories which Shanahan does as well. ApRoberts points out that Orlick's novel, like the student narrator's, has three beginnings.[11] Naturally, any author figure in At Swim-Two-Birds can be linked with any other simply on the ground that both are authors.

Ninnian Mellamphy suggests that Flann O'Brien "broods" over all of At Swim-Two-Birds, but, as "Flann O'Brien" is a pseudonym, that brooding presence is also a fiction (9). Jerome Klinkowitz sums up the situation: "There is no workable auteur theory for Brian O'Nolan. We are talking about a book, not a writer"(31; qtd. in Silverthorne 66). Sorapure, writing about Calvino describes a very similar strategy:

> To defeat the myth of the authoritative author, Calvino . . . multiplies images of himself throughout, thus making it difficult, if not impossible, to determine the single controlling voice of the author. (Sorapure 704)

Silverthorne argues that for Flann O'Brien "the best method of controlling one authority is another" (Silverthorne 71). In his influential essay, "The Death of the Author," Roland Barthes describes the effect of such control of author and authority as the "distancing" of the author, and his comments suggest why critics may find the text of At Swim-Two-Birds difficult:

> Once the author is distanced, the claim to "decipher" a text becomes entirely futile. To assign an author to a text is to impose a brake on it, to furnish it with a final signified, to close writing. This conception is quite suited to criticism, which then undertakes the important task of discovering the author (or his

> hypostases: society, history, the psyche, freedom) beneath the work: once the author is found, the text is "explained," the critic has won; hence, it is hardly surprising that historically the Author's empire has been the critic's as well, and also that (even new) criticism is today unsettled at the same time as the author. ("The Death of the Author" 53)

Eco utilizes the notion of the distancing of the author, and adds the Russian Formalist term "defamiliarization," in his discussion of authorial interventions in "Un Drame Bien Parisien" which "stress the metalinguistic presence of the narrator so as to produce effects of defamiliarization or of Verfremdung (as in Brecht's epic theater)" (The Role of the Reader 212).

If writing's claim to authority can no longer be based on the authority of the author, then style which is the mark of the author becomes unstuck, and instead of signalling authority, indicates instead the lack of authority. Although certain critics have discussed the issue in terms of At Swim-Two-Birds,[12] Barthes summarizes the implications most aptly: "neither the humanity nor even the humor of a style can conquer the absolutely terrorist character of language (once again, this character derives from the systematic nature of language, which in order to be complete needs only to be valid, and not to be true)" (Critical Essays 278).

It remains to be asked what the role of the author could be in such a world. Eco suggests Casablanca as an example of successful modern authorship: "For we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves, and celebrating a reunion" ("Casablanca, or the Clichés are having a Ball" 38). De Lauretis, in turn, suggests that the above neatly describes Eco's own incursion into fiction, and goes

on to describe The Name of the Rose in terms that have an obvious application to At Swim-Two-Birds:

> It is a novel made up almost entirely of other texts, of tales already told, of names either well known or sounding as if they should be known to us from literary and cultural history; a medley of famous passages and obscure quotations, specialized lexicons and sub codes (narrative, iconographic, literary, architectural, bibliographical, pharmaceutical, et-cetera), and the characters cut out in strips from a generic world encyclopedia. (Technologies of Gender 55)[13]

One of the earliest critics of At Swim-Two-Birds employs a similar metaphor which likens O'Brien's text to a collage; John Wain writes of At Swim-Two-Birds, "we do not hear the click of scissors and the swish of the paste-brush, we see and participate" (Wain 79).

The role left to authors would seem to be that described by the student, which is to plagiarize from and refer to other texts.[14] However, this is merely to present the argument of Chapter One in different terms. Before this statement of the authorial function should be seen as limiting, it should be realized that, at least according to theorists such as Bakhtin, this is what authors have always done. Furthermore, At Swim-Two-Birds itself must be taken into account as a product of the literary practice advocated by the narrator. The novel indeed exemplifies the narrator's theory, but is original for exactly that same reason. In other words, At Swim-Two-Birds embodies a strategy which enables it to, in Barthes words, "speak the old languages of the world in a new way" (Critical Essays 220). The diminished role of the author is actually the acknowledgement of the importance of the role of the readers, and

returns us to a final consideration of what Brooke-Rose calls "encoded readers" (122).

Myles Orvell and David Powell describe the interactive reading process invited by O'Brien's newspaper writing: "It was not only that Myles responded to his audience; to a large extent he created it, created the response itself, incorporated the reader into the act, usually in a teasing way" (53). They further suggest that O'Brien scripted "mock-readers" into his writing in a wide variety of ways, some of which we have already observed in At Swim-Two-Birds (i.e. "the man in the Street," etc.) (Powell and Orvell 54). Part of the reading experience, then, of At Swim-Two-Birds comes as readers test themselves against various "mock-readers" and readings that are encoded in the text. Like Trellis, readers find themselves in the ludicrous position of being interrogated by fictional characters.[15]

However, there is a certain degree of sense in the notion that if readers are constructing fictional worlds, they should be interrogated regarding the nature and implications of their activity by fictional characters. Since readers create a psychology to explain a character's actions or mode of speech, why should not a character serve as a foil which reveals the assumptions and complicity of readers? Throughout At Swim-Two-Birds, readers are invited on extensive "inferential walks," and forced to acknowledge their activity in constructing (to borrow another of Eco's terms) "ghost chapters."[16]

The novel thus alerts readers to the ways in which they participate in the worlds of At Swim-Two-Birds. Creating the worlds one reads is a real activity and is one that At Swim-Two-Birds reveals

to readers even as they are engaged in that activity. In this context, Brian McHale's assertion about postmodernist fiction can be seen to be especially true of At Swim-Two-Birds:

> So postmodernist fiction does hold the mirror up to reality; but that reality, now more than ever before, is plural. (McHale 39)

The achievement of At Swim-Two-Birds it that it lays bare its own literary devices, and in so doing, provides a mirror which allows readers to perceive the activity in which they are engaged. As Victor Shklovsky suggests of Tristram Shandy, At Swim-Two-Birds explodes conventional expectations, and in so doing allows readers to attend to their own involvement in the construction and demolition of the worlds within worlds that At Swim-Two-Birds describes.[17] In his discussion of the role of the reader, Eco ends with an analysis of a similarly transgressive piece of writing.

Both Shklovsky and Eco utilize writings comparable to At Swim-Two-Birds for the same reason that more conventional critics have found it difficult to read O'Brien's novel; writing of this variety insists that readers acknowledge their own implication in the generation of meaning. For critics who wish to maintain the fiction that divides the writer from the reader, a book such as At Swim-Two-Birds is dangerous. For writers and readers who are willing to explore what it means to read and write worlds, At Swim-Two-Birds stands as a dazzling exhibition of what a writer as reader and a reader as writer can do. Because readers are confronted with "inferential walks" and "ghost chapters" to such an astonishing degree, and because the chasms in At Swim-Two-Birds abound to such an

extent, reading of the text must be hyper-conscious. Out of that consciousness comes an awareness of what it means to read, and the realization that the chasms always exist and that readers are always called on to participate in the construction of fictional worlds, but that readers' attention to their own activity can be swallowed up by their immersion in conventional forms. Like Tristram Shandy, At Swim-Two-Birds is a conventional novel.[18] In fact, virtually every novelistic convention can be found deployed somewhere in the text, but always in such a way that the reader is forced to attend to the presence of that convention as a convention, rather than as an unremarkable experience of novel reading.

As I have tried to show in earlier chapters, At Swim-Two-Birds has a place in a distinctly Irish tradition of writing, but it also deserves a place among works that are considered post-structural, avant-garde, or metafictional. As authors such as Eco, Calvino, Borges, Cortazar, Barth, and others familiarize readers with comparable strategies, At Swim-Two-Birds will become easier to read.

A much-used device is to quote a writer's critical writing against the writer's fiction, and O'Brien's essay on Joyce has been far more often deployed against its author than in discussions of its subject. However, it ends with an image of Joyce's writing that is both whimsical and revealing. O'Brien wrote of Joyce that "His works are a garden in which some of us may play" (Stories and Plays 208). It is an image that fits all literature, but especially a work such as At Swim-Two-Birds, that plays in Joyce, as it does in virtually all of the accumulated traditions of European writing that exist. Heterogenous writing practices, including ancient sagas from the

Irish, eighteenth-century advice books, pulp-westerns, and the bildungsroman are juxtaposed by the text, but inter-relations between texts depend on readers' reading, playing and inventing connections. This activity is exuberant, invigorating play, but it is also the activity of creating worlds of meaning out of disparate fragments drawn from a variety of cultural discourses, an activity which is, after all, one we are always engaged in and one that has very serious implications for us all.

NOTES: CHAPTER THREE

[1]Of course, the "beginning" of Finnegans Wake occupies a different context and is changed accordingly if it is read (or re-read) after reading the pages that exist between the "beginning" and the "end." However, to a greater or lesser extent, this point can be made about all literature.

[2]Flann O'Brien suggests that the title would be more suitable for "a slim book of poems," thereby revealing what sort of expectations he considered that the title would foster ("To Longman's Green and Company, Ltd.," in "A Sheaf of Letters" 67).

[3]Genette's discussion of this point seems to pinpoint the source of some of the unease that a work like At Swim-Two-Birds has caused readers: "The most troubling thing about metalepsis indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees--you and I--perhaps belong to some narrative" (236).

[4]I do not mean to suggest that distinctions between Finn as imagined by the student narrator and as a character in Trellis' novel are well defined; clearly, they are not. The slippage or confusion between the two exemplifies the systematic transgression of diegetic levels that occurrs in At Swim-Two-Birds.

[5]Genette notes Todorov's point that "'The record [for embedding] seems to be held by the narrative which offers us the story of the bloody chest. Here
Scheherazade tells that
Jaafer tells that
the tailor tells that
the barber tells that
his brother (and he has six brothers) tells that . . . '"(Genette 214).
It is not difficult to discover comparable levels of removal in At Swim-Two-Birds, in descending order, one might suggest that
Stanzas are recited by
Sweeny, who is told by
Finn, who is told by
Trellis, who is told by
the student narrator, who is told by
Flann O'Brien, who is told by
Brian O'Nolan.

[6]Brinsley receives no better from the narrator who remarks after hearing Brinsley's poem (which Yeats included in the Oxford Book of Irish Poetry) "That's good stuff, you know," and "Bloody good stuff," which Kelly takes to refer to the drink (39).

[7]ApRoberts claims that The Athenian Oracle is a real book (82).

[8]J.M. Silverthorne makes this point (81).

[9]Brinsley makes this connection explicit in his remark: "I hope . . . that Trellis is not a replica of the uncle" (40).

[10]The love of beds extends to Byrne and even beyond the covers of At Swim-Two-Birds; note the epigram to The Hard Life that O'Brien selected from Pascal: "Tout le trouble du monde vient de ce qu'on ne sait pas rester seul dans sa chambre."

[11] "Orlick's fondness for his own fine writing is demonstrated by his retention of this paragraph in each of the three openings he makes for his story," (ApRoberts 94). Also note the description of Orlick's novel and the conversation in the narrator's room.

[12]See for example Richard F. Peterson.

[13]To a surprising degree, the critical descriptions provided by De Lauretis and others of the work of Eco and Calvino, are also descriptive of At Swim-Two-Birds. To quote De Lauretis once more:

> The Name of the Rose has no authorial voice, and hence no authority of its own, for every scrap of discourse--every description, incident, or character, every turn of phrase, narrative styleme, metaphor, or metonymy is an objet trouvé, whether it has been found in mass culture or high art, in an obscure patristic work or a contemporary text of French theory (58).

[14]Geoffrey Hartman describes this possibility in terms exceedingly appropriate to At Swim-Two-Birds: "fiction, of course, may itself move insidiously closer to criticism by various forms of mockery: feigned attribution, feigned originality, self-exposing plagiarism" (308).

[15]This is also precisely the sort of situation that appealed to O'Brien. Consider his alternate title for "A Bash in the Tunnel": "Was Joyce Mad? by Hamlet, Prince of Denmark" (201).

[16]Eco discusses the effect of synopsis and lost manuscript (The Role of the Reader 214).

[17]In "Two Meta-Novelists: Sternesque Elements in Novels by Flann O'Brien," Rudigar Imhoff compares At Swim-Two-Birds and Tristram Shandy with reference to Shklovsky.

[18]I have in mind Shklovsky's celebrated contention that "Tristram Shandy is the most typical novel in world literature" (57).

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion, or the Trial of Representation

The previous chapter concluded with a triumphant assertion of the importance of readers and the claim that At Swim-Two-Birds consistently draws attention to their play and work. This argument followed a discussion of Bakhtin's consideration of the novelist as one who negotiates language that is already spoken, which led to an exploration of Kristeva's work on intertextuality as a way of describing At Swim-Two-Birds' complex relation with language that is already written. The progression of the argument is reasonably neat and orderly, even reassuring. Sean Golden, in his essay "Familiars in a Ruinstrewn Land: Endgame as Political Allegory" discusses Irish literature as post-colonial writing and succinctly advances a similar reading of At Swim-Two-Birds:

> At Swim-Two-Birds is a profound exploration of the roles of reading (of the reader's perhaps unconscious expectations) and of literary traditions in the process of writing, and of the role of systems in structuring thought. Given the desire to write, what will the writer write about, and how will the writer write about it? How will a chosen form alter the writer's material, content, or intentions? How does the writer's own life enter these considerations? At Swim-Two-Birds is also an early "anti-novel" which refuses to let its process be taken for granted. Part of the motivation for writing this way must stem from a dis-ease with received tradition and a hypersensitivity to the ways in which convention and tradition mislead the unsuspecting reader and perpetuate outmoded systems. (442)

The argument that both Golden and I are making is that At Swim-Two-Birds foregrounds the role of readers in order to counter the oppressive weight of traditional representational practices.[1] Thus, the emphasis on reading in At Swim-Two-Birds is both an emancipatory strategy and is also, in places, exhilarating and playful. It is very tempting to close on such a note. However, At Swim-Two-Birds does not conclude with a joyous affirmation of the transformational power of reading. Instead, it ends with an extended depiction of increasingly horrible tortures. Virtually all of the critics who have considered the final section of the novel have described this depiction as sadistic and out of place. It has been read as a vicious working out of Oedipal anger and a self-destructive expression of writer's angst.[2] What has not been considered is that the context in which this violence appears culminates in a trial of an author which can be more generally read as a trial of representation. It is with this reading that I will conclude.

The device of having the tables turned on the writer appears for the first time in a "Synopsis, being a summary of what has gone before, for the benefit of new readers:"

> SHANAHAN and LAMONT, fearing that Trellis would soon become immune to the drugs and sufficiently regain the use of his faculties to perceive the true state of affairs and visit the delinquents with terrible penalties, are continually endeavoring to devise A PLAN. One day in Furriskey's sitting-room they discover what appear to be some pages of manuscripts of a high-class story in which the names of painters and French wines are used with knowledge and authority. On investigation they find that Orlick has inherited his father's gift for literary composition. Greatly excited, they suggest that he utilize his gift to turn the tables (as it were) and compose a story on the subject of Trellis, a fitting punishment indeed for the usage he has given others. Smouldering with resentment at the stigma of his own

> bastardy, the dishonour and death of his mother, and incited by the subversive teachings of the Pooka, he agrees. He comes one evening to his lodging where the rest of his friends are gathered and a start is made on the manuscript in the presence of the interested parties. Now read on.[3] (164)

What follows is, of course, an "Extract from Manuscript by O. Trellis. Part One. Chapter One." Like the student narrator, Orlick Trellis never gets beyond the first chapter. After three beginnings, he hits upon the expedient of scripting a trial for Dermot Trellis. Orlick, angered by a variety of interruptions, advice and literary criticism from his friends, writes them into the trial as Judges, Jury, and witnesses. Orlick Trellis' manuscript then proceeds with Shanahan, Lamont, and Furriskey all appearing as characters in Orlick's manuscript and as characters who interrupt the manuscript from a lower diegetic level. Thus, when Orlick first writes a description of Shanahan as "the eminent philosopher, wit and raconteur" something very surprising happens:[4]

> Shanahan at this point inserted a brown tobacco finger in the texture of the story and in this manner caused a lacuna in the palimpsest. (185)

That last word is worth paying attention to: the suggestion is that the manuscript that we are reading can be understood as "Writing material or manuscript on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for a second writing."[5] Which is, of course, precisely the project that Orlick and his friends are engaged in. Orlick, in particular, must over-write (and thereby erase) his father's writing in order to make way for his own. It is therefore not surprising that at this point the text becomes writerly with a vengeance. As I have

argued earlier, Dermot Trellis, as an author figure, recalls the high modern period, particularly Joyce and, more generally, a modernist mode of representation.[6] Orlick is well into the postmodern period. Under Orlick's hand, Trellis' "realistic" dialect-speaking Dublin cowboys become the "speakers" of an indistinguishable group of set-pieces of erudition expressed in a language that makes no attempt to represent spoken speech.[7] Thus, Orlick's writing style is his rebellion against Dermot Trellis and represents the younger writer's internalization of the Pooka's (and Stephen Dedalus') principle of non serviam. The situation cannot be read as a simple Oedipal struggle in which the jealous son Orlick (taken to "be" O'Brien) avenges himself on the father, Dermot (who "equals" Joyce), because both Dermot and Orlick have been developed as Joycean authors.

In fact, a whole network of complexities emerge as soon as one pays careful attention to the trial. Dermot Trellis is on trial for his unfair and undemocratic treatment of his characters, but the trial that is scripted by Orlick is superlatively unjust and authoritarian, and embodies exactly the practice with which Dermot Trellis is charged.[8] Before I comment on the trial, I will reproduce its last minutes which describe the reaction of the hapless Dermot Trellis' to Anthony Lamont's and the Pooka MacPhellimey's exchange of generous remarks with their friends who are also the Judges and Jury:

> At this stage, the prisoner, in order to protect his constitutional rights and also in an endeavour to save his life, pointed out that this exchange of pleasantries was most irregular and that the evidence of the witness was valueless, being on his own admission a matter of hearsay and opinion; but, unfortunately, as a result of his being unable to rise or, for that matter, to raise his voice above the level of a whisper, nobody in the court was aware that he had spoken at all except the Pooka, who

> practiced a secret recipe of his grandfather's--the notorious Crack MacPhellimey--for reading the thoughts of others. Mr Lamont had again donned his judicial robe and was making inquiries about a box of matches which he represented to have been put by him in the right-hand pocket. The members of the unseen orchestra were meticulously picking out an old French tune without the assistance of their bows, a device technically known as pizzicato. (206)

One of the most important features of this trial is that the accused is robbed of language. The idea of a trial in which one cannot speak in one's own defense is the stuff that nightmares are made of, but is also what the nightmares of history are made of. Trellis is doubly unable to defend himself because on one level he is consistently interrupted by the unseen orchestra, but, even more importantly, all of the words that he does speak are put in his mouth by the Pooka and, ultimately, by Orlick.[9] Thus a certain symmetry emerges when Slug Willard, gentleman and cowpuncher, charges that he was compelled by Trellis to speak in "guttersnipe dialect, at all times repugnant to the instincts of a gentleman" (197). Slug charges that his language has been unfairly controlled by the accused. However, this charge can only be advanced because the accused's language (especially his access to writing) is severely controlled. The charge is also doubly problematic given that the whole scene is written by Orlick Trellis, and we have already seen him amuse himself by putting the language of "gentlemen" into the mouths of cowboys.

That the issue of the theft or control of language is raised in the context of a trial is highly significant and can be seen in the historical context of English trials (in English) of Gaelic speakers. This is a nightmare that O'Brien presents in his Gaelic novel An Béal Bocht (translated as The Poor Mouth).[10] The trap that the trial in At

Swim-Two-Birds represents is clearly one of language, but more is at stake than language. In "Dominici, or the Triumph of Literature" Roland Barthes describes how literature can condemn an individual to the guillotine through the state's imposition of an alien psychology derived from bourgeois realism. The trial is a "Triumph of Literature" in the sense that literature has provided terms in which the plaintiff's "psychology" can be understood by people who cannot understand his language (Mythologies 43). Barthes concludes his essay by describing why the trial of Dominici is so threatening in terms that are relevant to the historical Irish experience of English "justice," and to the trial that concludes At Swim-Two-Birds:

> Only, confronting the literature of repletion (which is always passed off as the literature of the "real" and the "human"), there is a literature of poignancy; the Dominici trial has also been this type of literature. There have not been here only writers hungering for reality and brilliant narrators whose "dazzling" verve carries off a man's head; whatever the degree of guilt of the accused, there was also the spectacle of a terror which threatens us all, that of being judged by a power which wants to hear only the language it lends us. We are all potential Dominicis, not as murderers but as accused, deprived of language, or worse, rigged out in that of our accusers, humiliated and condemned by it. To rob a man of his language in the very name of language: this is the first step in all legal murders. (Mythologies 46)

The situation in At Swim-Two-Birds is more complex than that of language users robbed of their authentic language. The trial that Orlick writes represents a different kind of triumph of literature. I have already argued that Orlick's literary pretensions are linked with the student narrator's and more generally with "all who aspire to an appreciation of the nature of contemporary literature" (11). Furthermore, as the student narrator utilizes the anti-realistic

device of cataloguing the differences between Lamont, Shanahan and Furriskey in a list, Orlick's manuscript includes the beginnings of a catalogue of the sins of Dermot Trellis (161, 170). Lamont observes, "It's the sort of queer stuff they look for in a story these days. Do you know?" (170). Where Dermot Trellis writes readerly and realistic dialect for the Dublin cowboys, his son writes a writerly and anti-realistic series of exchanges between characters of identical names. Orlick Trellis is attempting to rebel through his writing against his father the writer, and, thus, some of the more traditional practices of Trellis senior give way to the son's avant-garde style. However, what also emerges are similarities. Dermot Trellis' borrowings from the writers of westerns are mirrored in Orlick's use of the Middle Irish epic of Sweeny to describe the tortures of Dermot, and Orlick's return to ancient Irish material may suggest another source for Dermot's cowboy stories; after all, Ireland's earliest epic recounts the story of a cattle raid. The high-handed manner that Dermot Trellis' characters so resent reappears in Orlick Trellis' treatment of both his father and the other characters that get written into his manuscript. Finally, both writers claim a moral intent in their writing. Dermot Trellis is writing against "sin and the wages attaching thereto," and his son is writing against Dermot's sin and attempting to attach wages thereto (35). However, despite the avowal of a moral intent by both, Dermot plans to include numerous assaults and Orlick is a torturer. Thus, both authors emerge as misguidedly moralistic, autocratic, and derivative.

With these points in mind, we can consider the conclusion of the trial section. Orlick is exhausted by his efforts and makes the

transition from writer to reader as he reads the legend concerning street safety printed of the back of his copybook. His reading, of course, appears in his manuscript in the manner to which we have become accustomed. Furriskey asks "Do think it would be safe to go to bed and leave [Trellis] where he is to the morning?" (207) Given that these characters initially revolted in the space of Trellis' sleep, it assuredly would not be safe to leave him. Orlick's comment "Safety first" utilizes the last words of the legend reproduced above with a dramatically different intent. The decision is made to kill Dermot Trellis.

> As long as you realize the importance of the step that is about to be taken, said Orlick, I have no objection. I only hope that nothing will happen to us. I don't think the like of this has been done before, you know. (208)

Out of a variety of new and revolutionary writing practices, this step is the newest and most revolutionary. Orlick is prepared to resolve his anxiety of influence in genuine Oedipal fashion, by killing the influencer; however, this attempt also leads directly to the termination of Orlick's manuscript and then Dermot's and, finally, the student narrator's. Ap Roberts reads this sequence as "the narrator's novel and Trellis' are ended with one blow. O'Brien's novel ends with our narrator having passed his exams and having solved some problems of art and some problems of his own self-determination" (79). However, I would suggest that the effect of the concluding implosion is quite the opposite. The freedom of characters and authors has been an issue throughout the book. However, here at the end, an author attempts to write in a radically different fashion, and to seize the

means of production that would allow self-determination and freedom from the father/author. Unfortunately, Orlick's rebellion re-enacts exactly the same writing praxis that he condemns his father for. By an obvious logic, if Dermot Trellis deserves to die for these crimes, and in the act of killing him, Orlick re-enacts them, then Orlick deserves to die as well. Annihilating Dermot Trellis is impossible because it is the pages of his manuscript that "made and sustained the existence of Furriskey and his true friends" (215-6). To put this in the terms suggested by the student narrator's poetics, if the modern novel is a work of reference, then it relies on preceding works. Thus, Orlick utilizes Dermot's writing as a work of reference from which he can draw characters, but if he attempts to destroy that basis then his own work will not survive. Orlick remains trapped in both tradition and traditional representational practices.

Once that point is made, the extreme pessimism of the ultimate conclusion can be understood. Silverthorne describes the sudden introduction of the metalanguage of criticism in the following: "The very language of the summary, however graceful, is nonsensical, a statement of self-deprecation by the student-narrator which reads, 'I mean nothing, I am clearly mad and irresponsible, harmless'" (79).[11] When "Professor Unternehmer, the eminent German neurologist, points to Claudius as a lunatic but allows Trellis an inverted sow neurosis wherein the farrow eat their dam," we witness the entire book being absorbed into a discourse. Trellis' "farrow" have, indeed, tried to eat their "dam," but the figure recalls Joyce's characterization of Ireland as the sow that eats her farrow. Of course, from a certain point of view, Joyce's use of Ireland could be read as the offspring

consuming the parent. Joyce, Trellis and Orlick are all linked, and one way to begin to understand this linkage is that any writer who writes in English cannot avoid participating in the tradition of Anglo-Irish literature in which Ireland has been digested and reproduced for an (often English) audience for a second consumption.[12]

In the Cruiskeen Lawn, O'Brien presented a history of Anglo-Irish literature as a literary cousin of the "stage Irish" tradition:

> We in this country had a bad time through the centuries when England did not like us. But words choke in the pen when one comes to describe what happened to us when the English discovered that we were rawther interesting peepul ek'tully, that we were naive, witty, brave, fearfully seltic and fiery, lovable, strong, lazy, boozy, impulsive, hospitable, decent, and so on till you weaken. From that day the mouth-corners of our smaller intellectuals (of whom we have more per thousand births than any country in the world) began to betray the pale froth of literary epilepsy. Our writers, fascinated by the snake-like eye of London publishers, have developed exhibitionism to the sphere of acrobatics. Convulsions and contortions foul and masochistic have been passing for literature in this country for too long. Playing up to the foreigner, putting up the witty celtic act, doing the erratic but lovable playboy, pretending to be morose and obsessed and thoughtful--all that is wearing so thin that we must put it aside soon in shame as one puts aside a threadbare suit. Even the customers who have been coming to the shop man and boy for fifty years are fed up. Listen in the next time there is some bought-and-paid-for Paddy broadcasting from the BBC and you will understand me better. (Best of Myles 234)

O'Brien makes the connection between the stage Irish tradition and the development of Anglo-Irish writing explicit in "Cruiskeen Lawn" column where he traces the development of "the 'school' which can in 1954 present the nosegay of pratie-coornanes, skidderie-wadderies, shellaky-bookles and pooka-pyles" (Hair of the Dogma 102). O'Brien develops a lineage from Carleton, Lover and Sommerville and Ross to "Synge-George Moore-Gregory-Martyn, with Yeats in the background,"

which concludes with "Sean O'Faolain and Frank O'Connor, with stories about wee Annie going to her first confession, stuff about country funerals, old men in chimney nooks after fifty years in America, will-making, match-making--just one long blush for many an innocent man like me, who never harmed them" (Hair of the Dogma 102-3). I will quote his conclusion in full:

> The set-up is this. These people turn angrily on the British and roar: "How dare you insult us with your stage Irishman, a monkey-faced leering scoundrel in ragged knee-breeches and a tail coat, always drunk and threatening anybody in sight with his shillelagh? We can put together a far better stage Irishman ourselves, thank you. The Irish Stage Irish man is the best in the world."
>
> I have done--temporarily. A vanatee, agraw, would ye put out me supper like a collen dhas, a bowl of stirabout med with injun meal and a noggin of buttermilk, surely? (Hair of the Dogma 103)

In other words, Irish writers have made the mistake of assuming that a certain style and vocabulary signifies Irishness and Irish identity, but it does not; it only signifies a written representational practice which was not developed by the people it claims to represent and is, according to O'Brien, hostile to those people. O'Brien contends that the variety of "Synge-song" that he parodies above and which, in its variants, is often taken to embody the "real old stuff of the native land" is no more than a signifier that points back to a tradition of representation rather than to the spoken language of real people. Of course, in time people may come to resemble the representation:

> And now the curse has come upon us, because I have personally met in the streets of Ireland persons who are clearly out of Synge's plays. They talk and dress like that, and damn the drink they'll swally but the mug of porter in the long nights after Samhain. (Best of Myles 235)

Like the varieties of lunacy that occur in the ultimate conclusion of At Swim-Two-Birds, where various signifiers are endowed with transcendental significance, these writers mistake the signifier for the signified. Thus, words which may have meaning in a local, Gaelic influenced dialect (e.g. "pratie-coornanes, skidderie-wadderies, shellaky-bookles and pooka-pyles") do not retain that meaning when utilized in the pseudo-dialect writing that O'Brien is attacking. Instead of these words having meaning in a net-work of difference, they collectively signify "Irishness" in the same way that the Russian names pronounced with fastidious intonation signify that the pronouncers are well educated.

While what is at stake here is, in large part, the question of the absorption and containment of the Irish traditions into English, O'Brien is also conducting a local enquiry into the more general questions of what it means to read. In his writing in "The Cruiskeen Lawn" he makes this concern apparent in a characteristically unique fashion:

> What one might call the pathology of literature is a subject that a person with education and intelligence should examine. What prompts a sane inoffensive man to write? Assuming that to "write" is to multiply communication (sometimes a very strong assumption, particularly when one writes a book about peasants in Irish) what vast yeasty eructation of egotism drives a man to address simultaneously a mass of people he has never met and who may resent being pestered with his "thoughts"? They don't have to read what he writes, you say. But they do. That is, indeed, the more vicious neurosis that calls for investigation. The blind urge to read, the craving for print--that is an infirmity so deeply seated in the mind of today that it is (well-nigh) ineradicable. People blame compulsory education and Lord Norcliffe. The writer can be systematically discouraged, his "work" can be derided and if all else fails we can (have recourse) to the modern remedy known as "liquidating the intellectuals". But what can you do with the passive

> print addict? Absolutely nothing.
>
> Consider the average day of the average man who is averagely educated. The moment he opens his eyes he reads that extremely distateful and tragic story that is to be found morning after morning on the face of his watch. Late again. He is barely downstairs when he has thrown open (with what is surely the pathetic abandon of a person who knows he is lost) that grey tablet of lies, his newspaper. He assimilates his literary narcotic in silence, giving 5 per cent of his attention to the business of eating. His wife has ruined her sight from trying for years to read the same paper from the other side of the table and he must therefore leave it behind him as he departs for his work. Our subject is nervous on his way, his movements are undecided; he is momentarily parted from his drug. Notice how advertisements he has been looking at for twenty years are frenziedly scrutinised, the books and papers of neighbours on the bus are carefully scanned, the bus ticket is perused with interest, a fearful attempt is made to read what is printed on the tab of a glove held in the hand of a clergyman two seats up. Clocks are read and resented. (The Best of Myles 237-38)[13]

If we consider At Swim-Two-Birds in the terms suggested here, we might argue that the project is two-fold and self-contradictory. O'Brien wishes to at once draw the attention of readers to the way in which their own addiction to text is a kind of passivity, but also to engage them in active reading. It is for this reason that At Swim-Two-Birds spins its unresolvable, magnificently plural, addictive web of stories which entrances readers, but which also foregrounds the reluctant virtuosity of those readers who attempt to read the novel. For the reader in the passage above, as well as for the Syngified Irish, reading has substituted for life. Both O'Brien's analysis of how thorough that substitution can be, as well as his ingenious attack on that substitution, are observable in this next passage:

> Print is one extreme of typographical development, the other being mathematical notation. It consists, in the occident anyway, of the representation of sounds by purely arbitrary shapes, and arranging them so that those

> in the know can reproduce the spoken words intended. The process is known as Reading, and is very uncommon in adults. It is uncommon because, firstly, it is in many cases frankly impossible, the number of phonetic symbols being inadequate; secondly, because of the extreme familiarity of the word-shapes to a population whose experience is necessarily derived in the main from marks printed on paper. It is in this second circumstances, familiarity with the word or phrase shapes, that has led to the unpremediated birth of a visual language.
>
> Now, you (yes, YOU) before you tear this paper into little bits, kindly tell me whether that last paragraph was written by me as part of my satanic campaign against decency and reason or whether it is taken from a book written in all seriousness by some other person. On your answer to that query will depend more than I would care to say in public. (The Best of Myles 313)

O'Brien first develops the notion that people can encounter words, concepts and life experiences first in print. This is a serious point and would seem to call for serious explication. However, the next move is to pull the text out from under readers. O'Brien suddenly raises the question of whether these are the serious writings of a serious author that he has reproduced or whether the words are penned by himself for some nefarious purpose. This dilemma, rather than undercutting the initial question, underscores it. No reader can determine how to respond to this piece of text without establishing a category within which to contain the text and the question that it poses. These two paragraphs pose a question intellectually, but then they also give that same question a performative dimension, by setting up a situation in which readers can only react by answering the question of the origin of the writing and thus proving their dependence on traditional reading practices or by not answering the question and becoming unable to proceed. I would suggest that in this passage O'Brien's practice in At Swim-Two-Birds

can be seen in miniature. Questions of reading are posed by the text, but they are also embedded in the text as traps.

With this context in mind, we may return to the ultimate conclusion of At Swim-Two-Birds for the last time. Many critics have found the end disturbing. Most have described it in terms similar to those that Thomas Hogan used of O'Brien when he wondered whether the writer "would expire, drowned in a pool of self-generated bile?" (140) However, the conclusion not only ends with the suggestion of the death of the author; it also concludes with a very pointed slippage from a description of critics' search for clear and certain ways to critically assess Trellis, to the description of lunatics engaged in a similar search for transcendant meaning.

Thus, when critical readers struggle to determine if At Swim-Two-Birds is, in the words of Timothy Hilton, "the most purely comic book of the century"(56) or what Kenner called a "prolonged college joke," that struggle becomes another chapter in At Swim-Two-Birds' interrogation of reading (A Colder Eye 257). At no point does the novel offer a resolution. Rather than adducing criticism as a master discourse that will clear up the issues raised by the novel, the critical mediation simply adds a further twist, deepens the confusion, and is ridiculed for ever having pretended to clarity and insight. In his letter to Ethel Mannin, O'Brien highlights this unresolvability, "It [At Swim-Two-Birds] is a belly-laugh or high-class literary pretentious slush, depending on how you look at it" ("A Sheaf of Letters" 69).

The end, then, is not simply the mutilated body of the "poor German" who inscribed his certainty in the transcendance of some

signifiers onto his wife's picture and into his own body. The post-ultimate conclusion of the book is, as I have argued, a trial of representation, but one that includes readers, and not just as jury, since readers have been implicated in the process of representation. The status of the novel as either "a belly-laugh or high-class literary pretentious slush" (and O'Brien's irony should fool no one--he took "high-class literary pretentious slush" very seriously) has been in doubt all along. Just as with his argument that reading seldom occurs (which does not at all contradict the suggestion that many of us have become "passive print addicts"), At Swim-Two-Birds embodies the contradictions that it explores. It is not a "high-class story in which the names of painters and French wines" are utilized to signify its class status which, then, having established its own privileged position can explore what it means to be "literary" from its own secure status (164). At Swim-Two-Birds, is, itself, in doubt. And it carries out its own interrogation from that dubious position. Through its proliferation of authors, plagiarists, critics, and sheer text, At Swim-Two-Birds becomes unauthorized.

And so, at the end, we turn from apparent suicide and bodily mutilation, to carnival. Eco criticizes what he calls the "hyper-Bachtinian ideology of carnival as actual liberation" ("Frames of Comic Freedom" 3). At Swim-Two-Birds is not about inversion seen as some fantasic liberation, but the novel nevertheless presents what Bakhtin called "carnival laughter" which is "directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants" (Rabelais 11). Bakhtin describes its most important features: "this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking,

deriding. It asserts and denies, buries and revives" (11-12). The carnival element of the novel thus not only overturns distinctions between genres of fiction and attacks the privileging of criticism over fiction, but also leaves readers, critics and other writers with an abiding sense of the book's ambivalence. The readers' need to resolve that ambivalence is part of what At Swim-Two-Birds explores.

Trellis' trial is another scene of an ostensible attempt to resolve ambivalence which (to quote de Selby) "is anything but what it appears to be" (The Third Policeman 144-45). It is the Good Fairy (of all people) who refuses to participate. After the court suspends the Habeas Corpus Act for the benefit of the Good Fairy, the cross examination proceeds:

> Are you acquainted with the accused? asked the Pooka.
>
> Maybe I am, said the Good Fairy.
>
> What class of an answer is that to give? inquired Mr Justice Casey sternly.
>
> Answers do not matter so much as questions, said the Good Fairy. A good question is very hard to answer. The better the question the harder the answer. There is no answer at all to a very good question.
>
> That is a queer thing to say, said Mr Justice Casey. Where did you say it from? (201)

That last question, of course, circles back to the sapient colloquy engaged in by the Pooka and the Good Fairy earlier, and does not respond to the Good Fairy's comment at all. To try to take up that comment would not be easy, since, by its own terms, if it is a worthwhile question, it cannot be answered. But this comment has some affinity with the carnival laughter that revives as well as buries. An answer, like death, is all too often a full stop, but a good question also threatens closure.

At Swim-Two-Birds ends with a shocking sequence of closures, but the very gratuitousness of the whole series calls attention to the control implicit in an ending. The closure is at once autocratically deployed and subversively undercut. It is important to emphasize that both apparently incompatible attitudes are simultaneously present; the ending, like the rest of the book, is deeply ambivalent. The desire of readers for a resolution of some sort, even a tragic one, is frustrated. At Swim-Two-Birds simply ends as it began, with an abundance and mixing of narrative frames. All the questions that readers might have, such as which characters are really real, or whether the book is serious, or even what its subject matter is, are left hanging. At Swim-Two-Birds presents a trial of representation, but the book, like the trial, never reaches a verdict and undercuts the seriousness of its own undertaking. Ultimately, what readers can hope to find in At Swim-Two-Birds are not answers, but questions which are unanswerable because they are saturated with amibivalence. Paradoxically, however, it is precisely their ambivalence and polyvalence which marks the overwhelming importance of such queries.

NOTES: CHAPTER FOUR

[1]The emphasis on reading in At Swim-Two-Birds is clearly transgressive when considered in the context of a practice such as classical realism which has been understood as a mimetic reflection of reality. That understanding both contains and masks concurrent assumptions of the pellucidity of language and of a readership that already shares a way of reading the world. Raymond Williams suggests that "the effect of 'lifelike representation', 'the reproduction of reality', is at best a particular artistic convention, at worst a falsification making us take the forms of REPRESENTATION as real." Williams goes on to argue that these assumptions can be seen as harmful if one understands that this "pseudo-objective version of reality (a version that will be found to depend, finally, on a particular phase of history or on a particular set of relationships between [people and between people and things]) is passed off as **reality**, although in this instance at least (and perhaps more generally) what is there is what has been made, by the specific practices of writing and painting and film-making. To see it as **reality** or as the **faithful copying of reality** is to exclude this active element and in extreme cases to pass off a FICTION (q.v.) or a CONVENTION (q.v.) as **the real world**" (Keywords, 261; emphasis in original). I would also note in passing that Williams' use of various typefaces achieves an effect strikingly similar to passages of At Swim-Two-Birds. I would suggest that both works employ this device in order to make strange language and, more specifically, the reading experience.

[2]Silverthorne makes this point: "Orlick's search for identity is fraught with peril. In an oedipal situation one's selfhood is purchased at the price of the other's." He goes on to suggest that the Oedipal conflict includes the author:

> My point is simply that the impossibility of overturning the repressive force, a constant in O'Brien's fiction, is a function, finally, of his ambivalence. Success, it would seem, entails rebellion, yet on the threshold of victory he hesitates overcome, I think, with the oedipal guilt and fear of consequences displayed so abruptly in the closing of At Swim-Two-Birds. (Silverthorne 81, 82)

[3]Orlick's knowledgeable use "of the names of painters and of French wines" and the student narrator's conversation with Brinsley in which "the names of great Russian masters were articulated with fastidious intonation," are similar insofar as these names serve only to signify the division between "high-class" or modern literary production and that favored by "mountebanks, upstarts, thimbleriggers and persons of inferior education" (164, 24, 25). In both cases, the names are not so much used to communicate as to signal mutual participation in the "high-class" world of modern literature.

[4]One example of the interconnections between the different levels of narration of At Swim-Two-Birds is the way in which this scene echoes the student narrator's sardonic observation of a moment in a conversation between Brinsley and his uncle. The former comments on the slothful habits of the student narrator:

> Ah don't be too hard on him, said Brinsley, especially about his studies. A little more exercise would do the trick. Mens sana in corpore sano, you know.
>
> The Latin tongue was unknown to my uncle.
>
> There is no doubt about it, he said. (163)

[5]Concise Oxford English Dictionary.

[6]Although comparatively little of Dermot Trellis' writing appears in At Swim-Two-Birds, a number of factors such as the diagnosis of the inverted sow neurosis, the use of "realistic" Dubliners who speak in dialect, the moral intention, the borrowing/creation of characters such as Finn MacCool and others all combine to suggest an obvious analogy with Joyce.

[7]One of the links between the student narrator and Orlick is that the deconstruction of Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan begins a few pages earlier when Brinsley "had expressed his inability to distinguish between Furrisky, Lamont and Shanahan, bewailed what he termed their spiritual and physical identity, stated that true dialogue is dependent on the conflict rather than the confluence of minds and made reference to the importance of characterization in contemporary works of a high-class, advanced or literary nature." This argument is refuted (on more than one level) by the student narrator's helpful adumbration of a "Memorandum of the respective diacritical traits or qualities of Messrs Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan" which lists differences such as pedal and volar traits, as well as favorite shrubs and unimportant physical afflictions. (160-161) There are not many more dramatically distancing devices in literature.

[8]The trial also raises once again the question of character since all the speeches are written by Orlick often with the "characters" to whom they are attributed interrupting. There are also other twists such as the Pooka who conveys the power of speech to a cow that was a character in one of Trellis' works. When the cow speaks, is that animal itself, drawn from some reality "behind" fiction; or is it a construction of Trellis'; or does the Pooka give the cow speech; or is the situation fabricated by the vengeful Orlick? Furthermore, we are presented with Orlick's friends both as he writes them and also as they have appeared earlier, but both versions of these characters appear in what we are told is Orlick's manuscript. Once again the implicit question as to what degree characters have their own identity and to what degree they are written remains insoluble.

[9]One of the earliest (and cruellest) of the Pooka's curses occurs before the trial, but appears to continue throughout the trial: "The character of your colloquy is not harmonious, rejoined the Pooka,

and makes for barriers between the classes. Honey-words in torment, a growing urbanity against the sad extremities of human woe, that is the further injunction I place upon your head" (177). It is at this point that Trellis ceases to use the vernacular (he has earlier called the Pooka "You leper's death-puke!") and graduates to a language very much like that of Sweeny (177). Of course, the Pooka's rejoinder is written by Orlick Trellis; however, that author earlier determined to "requisition the services of the Pooka Macphellimey" (172). The Pooka, it will be remembered, earlier described his vocation as "one that is fraught with responsibilities, not the least of these being the lamming and leathering of such parties as are sent to me for treatment by Number One" (107). As always, it remains impossible to settle on a reading of the Pooka as an independent agent employed by the author (following the poetics of the student narrator) or as a character "written" by Orlick.

[10]Bonaparte O'Coonassa recalls the trial in the following terms:

> I have a faint memory of being in a noble palace; being a while with a great crowd of peelers who spoke to me and to one another in English; being yet another while in prison. I never understood a single item of all that happened around me nor one word of the conversation nor my interrogation. I remember slightly being in a large ornate hall with others before a gentleman who wore a white wig. Many other elegant people were there, some speaking and others listening. This business continued for three days and I was greatly interested in everything that I saw. When all this was completed, I believe I was imprisoned again. (The Poor Mouth 122)

A further resonance is that Patrick Power footnotes this passage with a reference to the "hanging of the Joyces in Dublin in the last century after a trial which they never understood and for a crime which they did not commit" (The Poor Mouth 128).

[11]I think Silverthorne's assumption that this speaker is the student narrator is questionable, but even if it is read as his writing, it must still be recognized that he is speaking a discourse that is the recognizable property of academic institutions, and so whether or not these words are borrowed from elsewhere, the style certainly is.

[12]O'Brien could at times be a staunch defender of English (particurlarly against the likes of Finegans Wake), but he could also comment acidly:

> And, I know of only four languages, viz: Latin, Irish, Greek and Chinese. These are languages because they are the instruments of integral civilizations. English and French are not languages: they are mercantile codes. (Further Cuttings 86)

[13]In this light it is interesting that Italo Calvino includes a "non-reader" in If on a Winter's Night a Traveler.

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